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**Benefits and Losses:
Non-Traditional Adult Learners Returning to Education**

Doctorate in Education (EdD)

The Open University

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology

2014

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the experience of seven non-traditional adults returning to education. All had won individual or group ‘adult student of the year’ awards. The main research question concerned the the benefits and losses they experienced from returning to learning. Sub-questions investigated the benefits they gained by amassing and investing three forms of capital (identity, human and social), as well as their losses. A further sub-question investigated the contribution the research could make to educational practice.

This was a qualitative, interpretivist research, drawing on the auto/biographical narrative approach to ascertain the influence of the researcher’s educational experiences on the way in which the students’ accounts were organised and understood.

Using theme analysis, a model of the benefits and losses of learning was developed using data from interviews with the learners. Subsequently, a three dimensional, model was developed, identifying the outcomes of applying the forms of capital to three types of barrier to adult learning (dispositional, situational, institutional).

The main research method was analysis of the data in the light of the relevant literature. The findings were: that individual award winners’ experiences were predominantly positive, even when they did not lead to secure, well-paid employment; that group award winners were satisfied they had improved their culinary skills and knowledge of healthy eating; that social capital, acquired mainly through establishing new social networks, was the most valuable form of capital for securing better employment: that dispositional barriers were the most problematic and most likely to bring enduring losses for participants.

Further research was recommended in three areas: analysis of the content, form and delivery of basic literacy and numeracy courses; research into the employment situation of learners five years after completing their level one and two Access courses; investigation of why so few men enrol on basic skills courses.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about a group of adult women in their thirties and forties in Loomstown, a small town in the north west of England. They left school with few or no qualifications and, having returned to education as adults, won adult student of the year awards in their local learning centre.

The thesis covers a number of issues: the influence of policy decisions, the ethos of a predominantly working class female institution; the interplay of competing discourses concerning access and widening participation and their influence; the acquisition and investment of identity capital, human capital and social capital by the winners of the award in dealing with the barriers confronting them; and, most importantly, the experience of the award winners as non-traditional returners to education both during and after their return.

The main title of the thesis, *Benefits and Losses: Non-Traditional Adult Learners Returning to Education* is intended to be a concise expression of the participants' experiences. They faced many barriers, but were able with help to overcome many of them. Consequently, they enjoyed a number of benefits, but also experienced losses, which reduced the positive effect of the benefits.

Higher Education and Non-Traditional Learners

The four participants who aspired to go to university could all be described as non-traditional learners, a term that has been used to cover a large number of groups previously under-represented in higher education. Until the Second World War, higher education was mainly for traditional students, that is, white, middle class males entering university straight from school at eighteen or nineteen following GCE, A level or university entrance

examinations. In 1939, there were only 50,000 students in universities, fewer than 2% of the population (Dyhouse, 2007). While there were men from the poorer classes, particularly in the provincial universities, and some women, most (including the women) were from the wealthier classes (Dyhouse, 2007). The 'poorer' men would have been traditional students in one important sense: they had gained their university place by succeeding in traditional examinations at the end of their sixth form courses.

After World War Two, there was an expansion in higher education, slow at first, but increasing dramatically in the 1970s. By 2015, the higher education initial participation rate among 17 to 30 year olds was 47% (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015b). By this time, the composition of the student body was far more heterogeneous and diverse in social origins, gender, age and ethnicity than it had been seventy years earlier. In 1995, there were more women than men in higher education in the United Kingdom: 53% (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). At that time, there were,

... new groups of students who for a complex range of social, economic and cultural reasons were traditionally excluded from or under-represented in higher education (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p. 312).

Members of the new groups could be described as non-traditional students, also found in further education, but the term may have begun to outlive its usefulness. It can have different applications in different contexts. In the discourse of equal opportunities, it can highlight the challenges experienced by those from the more deprived sections of the community, many of whom may be women, but in the discourse of lifelong learning, it will foreground the older adult students with a vocational training background or those whose route into higher education are unconventional. Bowl (2001, p. 142) comes closest to identifying the non-traditional characteristics of the participants in this study:

‘Disadvantaged in terms of education, over 21, female, minority ethnic, working class background and poorer localities.’ However, all the participants in the study were white British.

The aim of the research

The aim of the research is to give an insight into the often moving accounts of the unique experiences of the women whose stories are being told. It is intended that they will resonate with the experience of others who have embarked on a similar journey, have helped others to do so or have conducted research into non-traditional learners’ experience. It is hoped that readers will gain an insight into how some managed to realise their aspirations and how those involved came to experience a mixture of gains and losses.

The overall purpose of the research is to make a new contribution to the knowledge and understanding of this unique context; to show how the particular learning experiences were made to work for these women students, and to make, ‘fuzzy generalisations’ (Bassey, 2000) or predictive statements about others in similar, albeit not identical, circumstances. Furthermore, it hopes to suggest ways in which some practices adopted by the further education learning centre could have relevance to the practice of similar institutions. The thesis has a general focus on issues of access and widening participation.

The research questions

The main research question is:

To what extent has a selected group of educational underachievers experienced benefits and losses from their later investment in adult learning?

The five sub-questions are:

- a) How important have *the identity capital* benefits been to the learners?
- b) How important have the *human capital* benefits been to the learners?
- c) How important have the *social capital* benefits been to the learners?
- d) How significant have any losses, problems or difficulties during and following their learning experience been for the learners?
- e) What contribution can this research make to educational practice in similar institutions engaged in similar work?

Widening participation and access: an examination of the terms

The thesis is about widening participation in, and access to, further and higher education. The participants in this research could be described as educational underachievers, that is, they had achieved fewer than 5 A*-C passes in GCSE or its equivalent when they were 16 (used by the government as an indication of satisfactory performance in the GCSE performance tables published each year). They had gained little from their first encounter with education, indicated by their lack of educational qualifications when they left school and their subsequent inability to find employment providing a reasonable income, job security and a degree of job satisfaction. How they found their way back into education and how some eventually achieved university graduate status are important parts of their widening access and participation story.

Widening participation and *access* or *fair access* are concerned with dismantling the barriers to higher education to ensure those from lower income families and other under-represented groups of whatever age are able to enter universities and colleges. *Wider participation* refers more specifically to the general consideration of groups underrepresented in higher education, such as the working class, women, ethnic minorities

and those with disabilities and the possibility of their participation in higher education (Burke, 2012). *Fair access* focuses on whether the distribution of underrepresented groups across the country's higher education institutions, which, admittedly, have different purposes and features, is fair, as measured by various socio-economic and educational criteria (OFFA, Office for Fair Access, 2015).

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills report (2011) draws on the definitions of Professor Colin Riordan of Universities UK:

Fair access is whether what you might call elite universities are really open to all. Widening participation is the activity generally in the sector of reaching out to students who just have not gone to higher education (House of Commons, BIS Committee, 2011, par. 180-1).

It should not be assumed that a commitment to *widening participation*, *access* and *fair access* is accepted by all as a valid or worthwhile enterprise. As will be seen in chapter three, there are two competing discourses, the meritocratic and the democratic holding opposing views about the value of widening participation and the way in which *fair access* to higher education might best be achieved and who its beneficiaries might be.

‘Widening participation (WP) is a term associated with addressing patterns of under-representation in higher education.’ (Jones, 2008, p. 1). However, even this claim needs to be modified. Kennedy (1997) reprimanded the newly independent further education colleges for undiscerning recruitment, merely increasing participation at the expense of the people they had hitherto served, working class people left behind in their compulsory education and in need of a second educational chance to avoid being economically and socially marginalised. Focusing on *widening participation* would redirect the colleges

from merely increasing participation and draw them back to their neglected constituency and *raison d'être*, improving the lot of the economically poor and educationally disenfranchised. In the years following Kennedy's rebuke, the term began to be applied more commonly to higher education.

Should widening participation in higher education mean modifying educational institutions to make them better equipped to cater for the previously under-represented cultural and social groups? Would it be better concentrating on identifying those from under-represented groups who might benefit from those institutions as presently constituted and equipping them to do so? This is a continuing debate with different institutions favouring one or the other approach.

Fair access is concerned with dismantling the barriers to higher education to ensure those from lower income families and other under-represented groups of whatever age are able to enter the universities and colleges that best serve their needs. Meritocrats will argue that elite universities *are* open to all because the means of entry are, in principle, open to all, while democrats will claim that higher education institutions need to reform themselves and their practices if the previously under-represented students are to gain admission, persevere and succeed (Burke, 2012).

Tight (1988) distinguishes *access* from *Access courses*. *Access courses* in further education denote formally recognised courses of two kinds for adults without traditional academic qualifications, often from disadvantaged groups. The first kind comprises the basic skills courses in literacy, numeracy and IT to improve students' chances of obtaining secure and better remunerated employment. The second kind provides an alternative route into higher education for adults alongside GCSE, A level or vocational courses (Tight, 1996). Many level three Access courses, those preparing students for higher education, are

offered in vocational, rather than academic subjects. Of the seven participants in this research, all began their return to education by undertaking the basic skills Access courses, but only four intended to move on to the level three Access courses enabling them to progress to degree study. The other three were doing courses unrelated to university entrance.

Adult learner awards: a brief history

All seven participants were winners of Adult learning awards at the centre where they studied. Adult learner awards first came to widespread notice in England in 1991, when the National Adult Learning Week was inaugurated. An independent television company wanted to publicise the week and seized on the stories of adult learners and the difficulties they had overcome, certain the accounts would engage viewers' attention. Television's involvement was later seen as critical in capturing public interest (Tuckett, 2012). The week itself had been introduced when the outlook for further education seemed particularly bleak and funding cuts appeared to be imminent (Hayes, 2011), a recurring threat, sometimes realised, in ensuing years. Celebrating the achievements of the award winners was intended not only to reward their efforts, but also to highlight to influential constituencies and interest groups the potential of adult education and lifelong learning to change the direction of people's lives for the better. Many years later, similar motives strongly influenced the inauguration of student awards in Loomstown, where this research took place. It was hoped the stories, combined with data from quantitative studies, would convince politicians that further education represented a worthwhile investment because it could improve people's lives and reduce spending in other areas of the national budget, particularly on health, social care, benefit payments and welfare (Spear, 2009). The stories provided persuasive evidence that learning could transform the lives of the old, drug addicts, the depressed and others adversely affected by negative influences. They were

also intended to persuade the community, particularly groups under-represented in adult learning, that learning could do for them what it had done for the winners (Spear, 2009). The adult learning week was, ‘an idea whose time had come’ (Tuckett, 2012). It enabled advocates of lifelong learning to share their passion and justify it to a national audience.

The model was widely imitated. By 2010, it had been adopted in fifty countries and in several British regions and localities, because it was an ideal vehicle for, ‘the key messages – that adult learning is good for our health, self-esteem and employability – backed by solid evidence’ (Thomson, 2010, p. 7).

The initial idea had been to reward and recognise individuals, but as there was also a movement to encourage teamwork in learning, group awards were made as well. There is an example in this research of a group award made to a team of learners, who had achieved together something they could not have done independently. The awards had an important secondary effect of publicising the good practice promoted by further education staff and outreach workers. Their inspiration and organisation facilitated the achievements of individuals and groups and their positive effects on the community and participating companies. They also demonstrated to employers, potential partners and investors in adult education that students were acquiring skills valued in the workplace: problem solving, team work, communication. These benefits were often gained in non-vocational courses, little valued by many employers, but shown to be worthwhile in themselves and useful frameworks within which to develop learners’ literacy and numeracy skills (Thomson, 2010).

The group awards were particularly effective in eradicating bad memories of students’ compulsory education experiences (Spear, 2009). The group projects became a means of acquiring a taste for learning and an appreciation of its value, while fostering an eagerness

to pursue it further (Stanistreet, 2012).

The adult awards week and the awards winners' stories were intended to remind society of its obligation to, 'under-represented groups -- including low-skilled, unemployed and low-paid adults and those with few or no qualifications... the most isolated and excluded adults [in society]' (Thomson, 2008, p. 7). All these purposes influenced and became a part of the culture of the Loomstown award that is the focus of this research.

The local background

Loomstown is one of several smaller communities surrounding and part of Moorsmills a post-industrial metropolitan borough with a population in 2011 of 276,786. Loomstown's population is 23,000 (Moorsmills Council, 2012). Until the mid-twentieth century, its industries were mining, spinning and farming. Today, most citizens work outside the town. In Moorsmills, the unemployment figure in 2011 was 8,004, 4.7%. The Loomstown percentage was much lower, 3% (Moorsmills Council, 2011a). However, the Index of Multiple Deprivation, using 37 different indicators (including income, employment, health and disability, education, skills and training, barriers to housing and services, living environment and crime), identifies three areas in Loomstown as being among the 20% most deprived in the country and a fourth area in the bottom 30% (Loomstown Community Profile, 2011, p. 2). According to the Office of National Statistics (Wright, W., 2011), 20,000 or 23% of Moorsmills households do not have one person in paid employment. More than a quarter of the population, 26%, could be considered 'hard pressed,' that is, among the poorest in the UK (Moorsmills Council, 2011b).

Loomstown's mines, mills and farms are now closed or have been sold to house people working in neighbouring cities easily accessed by motorway. Some Loomstown adult students have never worked or have worked only for short periods, part time or casually.

Some come to the centre with clear goals; others for social contact; others to regain ground lost through poor educational achievement.

Moorsmills Community College's main campus is in the town centre and its five satellites, including the Loomstown Centre, are in outlying districts. The Loomstown centre is likely to recruit full time students only from the Loomstown area. The introduction of basic skills Access courses led to funding being allocated there to recruit mature students from the town's four designated deprived areas. The project utilised a pioneering Community Learning Ambassadors' programme training students to work as centre recruiting officers and voluntary workers for various public service and voluntary groups. Almost all the Access course recruits were women. According to the Head of Centre, the more practical courses that might interest men were not available in Loomstown. There were few students under 25.

From 2005, the Loomstown Community Learning Centre presented an Adult Student of the Year award celebrating the achievements of adult returners to education. The nominees had been recruited from the deprived areas of the town. The research investigates four of the individual award winners and three group award winners, their motivation, and the effect their return to education had on them, their families and the local community. During the research, a three dimensional model, (Figure 6.1a, p. 153), was created, which enabled an exhaustive analysis of how the application, misapplication or lack of identity capital, human capital and social capital to the dispositional, situational and institutional barriers to learning generates benefits or losses for learners. The model and the conclusion concerning social capital are offered as new contributions to knowledge. The conclusion was that social capital is pre-eminent among the three forms of capital in achieving beneficial outcomes from a return to education for non-traditional adult learners. Without it students rich in identity capital and human capital found it very difficult to convert those

capitals into employment and the economic capital it would have generated. They needed the connections which sponsors, advocates and other influential people were able to create for them.

The individual awards were presented at Loomstown from 2005 until 2011, the year when the basic skills project ended, to learners whose backgrounds had been identified as among those most likely to include educational underachievers (DfEE, 2001). The group award was presented once, in 2008, to mark the diamond jubilee of the Loomstown Rotary Club, the awards' sponsor. All the individual winners were in their forties and had enrolled initially on Access courses at Level One (basic) and Two (GCSE A* - C equivalent). Three of them moved on to Level Three Access courses, equivalent to A Levels and NVQ courses. Although younger than the individual winners, the group winners shared their background. All were mothers in their twenties or thirties living on a deprived estate. They ran healthy, economic cooking courses on their estate under their teacher's direction. The group prospered and recruited several students otherwise unlikely to have been attracted to the learning centre. Later, following the teacher's resignation through ill health, the group foundered.

The individual and group award winners are grouped separately for the purpose of the research. However, three individual award winners and two group award winners did not take part because they were seriously unwell or had moved away from the area. The group members' reasons for returning to learning were different from those of the individual winners. They did not aspire to higher education, but wanted to improve their own lives and, later, those of their neighbours.

My interest in the work of the Loomstown centre with non-traditional adult learners was seized initially by the awards evening nomination speeches of Judith, the head of the

Loomstown Learning Centre (Judith, like all names of people and places in this thesis, is a pseudonym). Year after year her speech was seen as the highlight of the occasion. It suggested that part of her mission was to use education to lift the ‘hard to reach,’ working class learners into the respectable working class, in which her own place was secure (Skeggs, 1997a). There were usually nine or ten nominees and Judith would tell each one’s story in turn: an account of the difficulties they had faced in their lives; how they were dealing with them; and their educational ambitions for the future. Judith’s words would bring some listeners to tears and certainly convinced her audience that the awards evening was a worthwhile enterprise. I wanted to know more about these people, their stories, and how the stories continued. Several parts of my own autobiography attracted me to this research and I refer to them in more detail in chapter four.

The winners’ citations in Judith’s nomination speeches often positioned them in negative situations relating to health or history: domestic violence, discord and divorce; drug abuse; homelessness; depression and other mental health issues; disability; negative experiences of school and poor school performance. All these situations have been identified as factors in educational underachievement (DfEE, 2001).

In 2013, in an interview for this research, Judith said of the level one and two access students at Loomstown,

‘It took a lifetime for those people to get to where they are now; you are not going to cure all that in six weeks. It takes much, much longer to get that person into a stable position, where they can actually hold a job down and cope with all the problems of living their lives. There’s usually a couple of partners, usually people who’ve experienced violence and usually not living in very good conditions, they’ve not been parented and they don’t know how to

parent themselves, all the usual stuff, it takes a long time to put that right. It's never going to be easy.' (Judith)

Moira, the teacher in charge of Access courses, provided a glimpse of the difficulty many of those on basic skills courses had in adapting to an academic environment:

I've been in shock over the past few years. I've had to do 'disciplinaries' on adult students. And that is basically down to the fact that something has broken down, either in society or in the education system. I suspect both. And they're not learning to be independent people (Moira)

Both teachers portrayed their students as wild and undisciplined and implied that it was their challenging task to transform these unpromising working class women into successful learners. Judith, however, presented herself as a warm hearted teacher and educational leader, utterly committed to the community of Loomstown, her students and their success. She, in common with most other teachers at the centre, spoke in the local dialect, which appeared to draw her closer to her students and give them confidence. It made the centre more welcoming than a school with its attention to Standard English might seem and helped students to feel they belonged. There seemed to be a conscious emphasis on a working class ethos intended to enable students to feel at ease in an educational environment and belong comfortably in both the neighbourhood and the learning community. Judith, who had formerly lived in one of the areas of deprivation for some years, identified with the students as fellow members of the working class, but distanced herself from their way of life, implicitly positioning herself in the respectable working class,

The women know I understand their life, because I have lived it myself. Now I

live in a beautiful house and have a villa in the south of France, but people know where I'm from, that I'm one of them. What I've done, they can do.

(Judith).

Level one and two Access courses were offered at Loomstown once a year and ran for 36 weeks. All groups comprised 14 to 16 learners at the beginning. Almost all would finish the course. One or two might fail. Some would re-sit and a few drop out. Most who persevered achieved the levels eventually. Several students progressed to level three Access courses or vocational ones each year. There did not appear to be any records of earlier years, but this information was supplied by Emily, a long serving teacher who became head of centre in 2013.

After the closure of the level one and two Access courses in 2011, the number of students recommended for the adult student award dwindled. The award no longer seemed to interest the student body, possibly because the kind of student it had targeted was no longer significantly represented at the centre.

An outline of the remaining chapters

Chapter Two begins by identifying the policy landmarks since the Second World War, which shifted higher education in England and Wales from being largely the preserve of a small elite of white middle class male school leavers to a system committed to massification and drawing its students from a much wider population with a more even distribution of males and females, more diverse in social class, ethnicity and age with more representation from other minority groups. The landmarks begin with those directly relating to higher education itself and then to further education's efforts to ensure those who had not taken the traditional routes to higher education could be prepared in other, more appropriate ways for undergraduate study. The further education review includes a

discussion of the government document, *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001), which provided the funding for the basic skills Access courses at Loomstown, although Access courses themselves were already running in many further education institutions before that. There is an analysis of the developing taxonomies of social class from the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century to the early years of the twenty first century. The changing social class configurations reflected the social, political and economic developments in society itself. Awareness of these developments helps to locate the adult student participants in this research within the British class system as it is now understood.

Chapter three prepares the way for analysis of the participants' stories. It discusses the barriers to education likely to be encountered by non-traditional adult learners. It reviews issues of access and widening participation before examining the competing meritocratic and democratic discourses of widening participation in higher education. It continues with an investigation into misrecognition of under-represented groups in higher education. It concludes with a summary of the three forms of capital that will be applied to better understand the students' learning experience and how they deal with the barriers blocking their progress.

Chapter four focuses on method and methodology in the research. It identifies the research as qualitative and interpretivist, and explains its epistemological perspective. It explains the two approaches taken in analysing the data. It analyses interviews as appropriate occasions for gathering qualitative data and finally shows how its ethical approach protected the interests of the participants, respected their dignity and honoured the need to treat the data with sensitivity and respect.

Chapter Five scrutinises the participants' stories from the data gathered in the interviews and draws on the principles of theme analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) identifying a main

theme and seven subthemes, the benefits of education while exploring both benefits and losses in the participants' lives.

Chapter six explains and then applies the conceptual model that emerged during the research and focuses on the interactions between the three forms of capital and the three types of barrier facing learners returning to education and the benefits and losses that ensue.

Chapter seven responds to the main research question and the five sub-questions about the benefits and losses experienced by the participants and how the research might be utilised by practitioners in the future. It explains the contribution of the research to new knowledge and includes a reflection on the participants' experiences.

Chapter eight concludes the thesis with the researcher's final reflection on the experience of conducting the research.

CHAPTER TWO

ACCESS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter works from the premise that the experience of the students returning to education cannot be understood or interpreted without an awareness of the various forces influencing that experience. It begins by reviewing the wider context and background of higher, and then further education developments since 1944, which enabled research participants to aspire to and enter further and higher education, albeit under certain limitations and constraints, and to enjoy some of its benefits, a focus of the research. Without the government policy document, *Skills for Life*, (DfEE, 2001), there would have been no level one and two Access courses for adults returning to education. Consequently, its assumptions are examined, particularly those positioning students within a deficit discourse.

Since social class plays a central part in the construction of students within the document, there is an analysis of how the understanding of class has developed and changed in Britain during the past two centuries and why the different groupings, particularly among the poor, have been modified and redefined to take account of the effect of changing political ideologies and policies. The positioning of women, particularly those from the less prosperous groups, is given special attention because the women participants in the thesis research were deliberately recruited from those groups to the Loomstown Learning Centre.

ACCESS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION: POLICY LANDMARKS 1944-2011

Higher education

The higher education policy landmarks of the last seventy years could be seen as bridges constructed to cross the barriers or as steps on a journey to increased inclusion in higher education, which, by the early twenty first century allowed far more English and Welsh students from outside the traditionally recruited group to enrol as undergraduates. The review of further education policy relates to repairing the gaps in adults' education and opening new opportunities to them and also to providing a route into higher education for those who want to progress to, and can benefit from it.

The university widening access policy history could be said to have begun with the Education Act (1944) and its commitment to increasing the number qualified for university education to ensure more university trained members of professions (Burke, 2012). This did not imply a widening of participation across social groups, but simply an increase in the number of university places available, filled overwhelmingly at that time by the higher social classes (Lieven, 1989). Less than 2% of eighteen to twenty one year olds attended university in 1939, while, among women, the percentage was below 0.5%. The overall percentage had increased to 3.7% by 1948, but was still drawing on the same social groups (Reay et al., 2001).

The Anderson Report (1960) represented an important advance for those students unable to finance their own studies. It recommended mandatory means-tested student grants, introduced in 1962. They were intended to ensure no student should be excluded from higher education for lack of money, previously a major barrier for working class students, unless they could win a scholarship or exhibition to fund their studies (Dyhouse, 2007). A further and major step forward was made three years later when the Robbins Report (1963)

urged that, ‘all young people qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full time course in higher education should have the opportunity to do so’ (p. 49). Not only did it recognise that more people were capable of degree level work than had had access to it previously, but committed the country to eventually providing enough places to enable them to do so. However, it did make it clear that students would now study ‘in a highly differentiated system’ (Burke, 2012, p. 13), which meant that different degrees from different institutions would have different levels of prestige and currency; the value of a university education would depend on where it was acquired. This was already the case, but the new system seemed bound to reinforce the situation

A concern for social justice demanded that higher education should include more working class students and it was expected that ‘the pool of ability,’ (Burke, 2012, p. 49) would grow as educational standards in schools rose and more pupils sat and passed public examinations. In what seemed an expression of a democratic discourse of widening participation, it was recommended that institutions should be more flexible in admitting students to degree courses. Thus, student teachers in the newly-styled colleges of education who:

... either on entry or after a preliminary period are found to possess the capacity, should be able, if they wish, to take a course of study that, in addition to giving professional training, leads after four years to a degree. For a minority of students transfer to a university may be appropriate (Robbins, 1963, p.270).

This was a further example of differentiating between different degrees, implying that the then new Bachelor of Education degree for intending teachers might not be considered the equivalent of a traditional university degree. However, the report’s recommendation that

colleges of advanced technology should be re-designated technological universities appeared to be an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to blur the hierarchical divisions between higher education institutions, although simply calling them universities would not guarantee them increased prestige. Six new universities, one in Scotland, would be created immediately. The report's central aim to increase participation of 18 year olds in higher education was not achieved very effectively. Although the percentage of 18 year old undergraduates did increase, it did so more slowly after the report had been published than it had done before (Matheson, 2004). However, in another major development in the same year, the government announced in its White Paper, *A Plan for Polytechnics and other Colleges* (DES, 1966), its plan to introduce degree courses outside the university system. The students of the new public sector polytechnics, thirty of which would open in 1970, would be able to obtain degrees. This was a significant move towards widening participation as it meant far more potential students lived within travelling distance of a degree awarding institution. It made it possible for students such as those at Loomstown to aspire to university level education, as their domestic commitments meant they could not travel far to attend courses. The CNAA, the degree awarding body for polytechnics founded in 1964, was soon conferring twice as many degrees as all the universities combined, evidence that the number of graduates was increasing significantly. Nevertheless, the new degrees were not regarded by everybody as the equivalent of the traditional ones, however strongly it was asserted they were (Matheson, 2004). More than forty years later, Loomstown students moving on to local universities reported they were still facing some strongly held views that their degrees would be inferior to the more traditional ones.

In 1978, accessibility to degree courses was improved even further. In a development that would closely involve further education colleges and put degree studies within the reach of an even greater number, the DES invited eight LEAs to provide Access courses for mature,

unqualified adults to enable them to qualify to become undergraduates (DES, 1978; Wilkinson, 1999). This would later prove to be a breakthrough of vital importance to non-traditional learners, such as the Loomstown students, because it enabled them to obtain alternative qualifications to the traditional A level passes in courses with a curriculum and teaching style more appropriate to their educational background, although it may have raised fears among the supporters of a meritocratic higher education system that the new qualifications threatened traditional standards.

Further education

During this time, a new influence from another direction was exerted when demographers predicted that the number of eighteen year olds in the population would drop by a third between 1984 and 1996. This encouraged higher education institutions to recruit more adults to fill the anticipated gap left by the smaller number of eighteen year olds. When the predicted fall in the number of eighteen year olds came to pass, it benefited the middle class higher education students in the age group. The proportion of them in the student body increased, while the number of working class students remained the same (Lieven, 1989). However, the government went some way to dealing with this problem in its White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987), in which it formally recognised three routes into higher education: traditional academic qualifications; vocational qualifications; and adults' (level three) Access courses. The initial upper case letter in 'Access' signalled that these courses were within the nationally recognised framework for admission to higher education (Tight, 1988), and did not simply make access to education in general easier, although some meritocratic observers may not have been convinced (Wilkinson, 1999). Degree level education was no longer to be confined to a wealthy élite recruited mainly from schools. However, by this time, the view of university education held by many students had shifted. They were no longer convinced by the traditional belief that any degree was worthwhile for its own sake and sufficient indication

of a person's ability to pursue unrelated, intellectually demanding occupations. Many preferred vocational degrees related to professions in the hope of ensuring a better route to secure employment (Reay et al., 2005), although others continued to study subjects for their own sake rather than for the vocational opportunities they might bring. It was suggested that this general shift was, and remained, related to social class; the lower social classes were more likely to choose less prestigious institutions and less highly regarded, degree subjects, including vocational ones (Reay et al., 2005). While the criteria for determining social class and degree course status are contentious and complex, it is worth noting that the four individual award winners participating in this research, all from lower socioeconomic groups, aspired to vocational degree courses at less prestigious universities, mainly because they believed access to a degree related occupation would be among the major benefits of graduation for them.

There was another important effect of the spread of Access courses after 1987. The level three Access courses ratified by *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987) were aimed particularly at previously under-represented groups: women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and members of poorer socioeconomic groups. This intention was reinforced by Kenneth Baker, the then Education Secretary. Invoking a democratic widening participation discourse, he declared higher education institutions would need to reposition themselves to draw in students, particularly mature students, from non-traditional backgrounds. This was an expression of a social justice discourse seeking to increase higher education recruitment among groups traditionally excluded by systemic disadvantage (DES, 1989). Traditional universities, possibly more reluctant to modify their practices than the newer institutions, tended to respond more slowly to his plea than he might have hoped. Nevertheless, the access policies were having a noticeable effect. When the Education Reform Act (1988) was published, more than a third of higher education students were over twenty five, although McGivney (1990) asserts that most of

them at the time would have come from the higher social classes. Meanwhile, Oxbridge and the Russell group universities maintained their status as the most prestigious institutions (Tight, 1993). Throughout the 1980s, governments had been asserting that 'more means different,' not 'worse' (Wakeford, 1993); quantity did not compromise quality. Their purpose was to persuade those supporting meritocratic ideals that the students who had qualified by way of the newer routes into higher education had not diluted the high standard of degree level work. Polytechnics, colleges and the Open University (the last without demanding any qualifications at all) were all offering degree courses alongside the traditional universities and striving to meet the diverse needs of mature students. At first, the new undergraduates were mainly 'second bite' students, that is, they had already qualified for higher education when they left school, but had delayed entry for some years before taking a 'second bite' (OECD, 1999). They were usually from traditional, grammar school and A level backgrounds. For 'second chance' students, those without traditional A level qualifications, there were several 'second chance' ways of gaining access, but mainly to recently established and less prestigious courses. They could gain admission with equivalent qualifications: Access courses; the JMB's Mature Entry examinations and the open entry policy of the Open University (Matheson, 2004). These newer degrees continued to be regarded with caution

Further and higher education

The Further and Higher Education Act (DES, 1992) had very far-reaching effects, still being felt a quarter of a century later. It brought polytechnics into the university sector, but also marginalised the power and influence of local authorities by bringing further education colleges under central government control. Five years after these momentous changes, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) set the target of 50% participation in higher education of 18 to 19 year olds, the percentage reckoned to

include all those able to benefit while satisfying their own and their employers' needs.

Twenty years later, in 2017, that target had still not been achieved.

Throughout the 1990s, the *Lifelong Learning* initiative was gaining momentum, accelerated when Labour came to power in 1997 and David Blunkett, the newly appointed Education Secretary, set out its aims (DfEE, 1999). Learning would become an accepted feature in everybody's daily life, the responsibility of individual learners (a new development), employers and the state. All would be involved. All learning, formal and informal, would be valued. Learning would serve the learner, not the provider and would play a key rôle in individual and national prosperity (Riddell et al., 2000). These were high ideals and were not always realised. The government's policies were intended to embrace people of all ages. At the turn of the millennium, the *Aimhigher Excellence Challenge* (DfEE, 2000) was introduced. It was dedicated to raising the aspirations of able, unmotivated, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds towards further and higher education, but without diluting entry standards. This positioning of potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds within deficit discourses is one rejected by supporters of democratic widening participation, since it seems to hold them, rather than social structures, responsible for their situation (Burke, 2012). The democratic view may be an overstated one as it appears to deny potential students from poorer backgrounds any agency in controlling their situation or shaping their destiny. Their more powerful enemies may be their lack of middle class purchasing power and the danger of misrecognition. The *Aimhigher Partnership for Progression* (DfEE, 2000), introduced at the same time as the *Aimhigher Excellence Challenge* and was integrated with it in 2004 to strengthen the further and higher education partnerships already in place locally and regionally. The two programmes were brought together to make the government's widening participation policy more coherent. In the same year, a second set of proposals was published in *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), including one to set up an

Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The document outlined the government's intention to protect widening participation for poorer students during a period of rising fees for university education. Seven years later, the Browne Report (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2010) claimed the top-up fee system had not lessened participation in higher education, although it did mean that students needed more advice about the financial opportunities available, an observation that seemed to suggest some less wealthy students might have encountered financial difficulties. The increase in widening participation had been smaller at the traditionally more selective universities than in the other higher education institutions (Burke, 2012), perhaps an indication they were embracing the changing approach to recruitment less enthusiastically than other institutions, meaning the advantages of attending a prestigious university were still largely confined to those from society's higher reaches.

During the last years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty first, the number of level three Access courses continued to grow. In 1985 there were very few, 130, but by 1989 that number had increased to 570 (Harrison (1993). However, not all has gone smoothly and some have faced criticism. In 2014, Sir Martin Narey (DfE, 2014) published his report, *'Making the education of social workers consistently effective,'* which stressed the high level of theoretical knowledge required to practise as a social worker. It lamented both the poor quality of some students recruited through Access courses lacking rigour and the poor quality of the degree itself in some institutions. Reports such as his fed the unease felt by some that degree standards were not being universally maintained.

Some students, including some at Loomstown, moved from level one and two basic skills Access courses to level three courses preparing for degree work, but this appeared to be a happy outcome unintended by those who had introduced the courses.

The developing rôle of further education

During the last years of the twentieth century, the rôle of further education was changing and expanding. The report, *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1987) stressed the importance of offering foundation degree courses below bachelor degree level to mature students. Many of these courses were subsequently provided in further education colleges. Their purpose was to meet an anticipated future demand from employees and individuals for locally available, accessible, diverse and flexible higher level education below bachelor degree level, intended to raise the skills level of people in certain occupations, particularly those, such as classroom assistant or medical support worker, supporting the work of professionals (Greenwood et al., 2008). Most gave successful students the chance to convert their qualifications to bachelor level degrees.

In 1997, Helena Kennedy, QC reminded the further education colleges of their important rôle in English education: to do ‘everything that does not happen in schools and universities’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 1). Having recalled further education colleges’ work over many years in offering second chances to those who, usually through no fault of their own, had been denied or deprived of their first chance of education, she praised the colleges for responding to the Further Education Funding Council’s call to growth following the changes brought about by the 1992 Act. However, funding had frequently been linked to successful outcomes, so recruitment had been concentrated on those most likely to succeed at the expense of those who most needed to benefit from education (Kennedy, 1997). Kennedy was adamant that they must not be neglected and emphasised that the best must not prosper at the expense of the rest, particularly those yet to experience educational success. She suggested that lottery funding should be directed at financing their education: ‘The very people who spend most money on the lottery would be those who benefited’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 12). However, the idea did not come to fruition. When the Lottery

Millennium projects ended, a decision was made to divert £1.66 billion from non-Olympic causes to the 2012 London Olympic Games and Kennedy's funding vision was not realised (National Audit Office, 2007).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the government of England and Wales had introduced policies that ensured the composition of the student body in higher education changed markedly from what it had been at the end of the Second World War. More students from different social groups were enrolling on undergraduate courses. However, for the Loomstown students, a policy initiated in the first year of the new millennium would play an important part. *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001) was intended to improve the basic skills of those whose very poor literacy, numeracy and IT skills were preventing them from entering the kind of employment that would ease their hard financial lot and enable them to play a fuller part in the civic life of the country. However, it also helped those with ability, but lacking academic qualifications to achieve well in education. They could begin a journey ideally taking them to university graduation and well-paid employment, security and better prospects and enabling them to play a fuller rôle in society.

The 'Skills for Life' initiative

By 2001, the Government's attention had turned to under-represented groups in adult education generally and how the members of those groups might begin to engage in lifelong learning. Its 'Skills for Life' policy aimed at addressing the poor literacy and numeracy skills of 20% of the adult population had been launched following Sir Claud Moser's proposals (Moser, 1999). The policy document, also called, *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001), was published two years later. It introduced new level one (basic skills) and level two Access courses (GCSE A*-C equivalents) in literacy, numeracy and IT, and targeted certain identified priority groups to take them. There had been similar courses available at a local level in various colleges before, but this policy introduced a national initiative, and

targeted the non-traditional learners from whom the Adult Students of the Year would be recruited at the Loomstown Community Learning Centre.

The *Skills for Life* document put the responsibility for improving a person's academic and employment prospects firmly on his or her shoulders. However, this appeared to overstate what was possible, since Rees (2000) had shown a person's pattern of post-school participation in education or training could be predicted with 75% certainty, based on age, place of birth, gender and family background. Hamilton and Pitt (2011) claimed that social structures, not personal shortcomings, were responsible for the underachievement of marginalised groups, although this assertion, too, seemed exaggerated, as personal shortcomings would inevitably have played a part in the underachievement of some individuals. The same article criticised more convincingly the numeracy and literacy courses themselves because they were skills-based and functional, rather than focused on critical literacy and understanding, so limited in their enduring benefits (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011). The courses were to be offered primarily in further education colleges, but also in the workplace and by voluntary groups. The number of people recruited to the level one and two courses nationally, 1,471,300, was impressive. However, they brought no improvement in low level literacy and numeracy skills between 2003 and 2012. In addition, level one and two Access programmes in literacy did not give learners durable skills because in their daily lives they could not use and reinforce the skills they had acquired (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). Learners' numeracy achievements were even less encouraging and there were specific concerns about the qualifications of the teachers and their competence to deliver the curriculum (Ofsted, 2011). These issues seemed to provide sufficient reason to end the project, which happened in 2010 (Excellence Gateway Project, 2010).

In the *Skills for Life* document (DfEE, 2001), the group targeted comprised those adults in

the population with literacy and numeracy skills roughly equivalent to those of an older primary school child. The group is identified as a social threat, ‘the latest incarnation of the underclass... constructed by successive governments,’ as a result of their economic policies (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011, section 3.5). *Skills for Life*, positioned the target group in a deficit discourse constructed by separating them from the ideal reader through the considered use of personal pronouns (‘them’), demonstrative adjectives (‘these people’) and negative imagery: ‘a shocking 7 million adults in England cannot read and write to the level *we* {italics added} would expect of an 11 year old’ (p. 2). All these linguistic devices served to distance the group from the reader. The viewpoint of *Skills for Life* seemed much less sympathetic than that of Kennedy (1997), which had been warm and supportive. Kennedy had not blame the group for its lack of achievement, which she asserted was a consequence of unequal social structures. She saw the group itself as an untapped national resource rather than the unwelcome burden on the nation portrayed by *Skills for Life*.

Among *Skills for Life*’s target or ‘priority groups,’ (DfEE, 2001, p. 1) with poor levels of literacy and numeracy are those living in disadvantaged communities, such as those living in the four deprived estates in Loomstown, all targeted by the centre’s outreach workers when the level one and two courses were introduced. The document identifies: ‘other groups at risk of exclusion’ (p. 6): lone parents, unemployed people, people on benefits, people dependent on drugs and alcohol, and those claiming disability benefits. The Loomstown adult students of the year included people in all these categories. The project was aimed at a wide ability range, from those, ‘requiring intensive help from specialist teachers to those who may only need to brush up their skills’ (p. 35). The Loomstown learners included members of both groups. Some of them had achieved far less at school than they might have done in more favourable circumstances.

In contrast to the main body of the document, *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001) also had a section with a warm and welcoming tone. It appeared to have been written for members of the target group, consistently addressed by the more friendly, second person personal pronoun, 'you'. The section comprised seven two-page spreads, each with a coloured photograph on one side and a biography on the other. The seven spreads portrayed five men and two women from three different ethnic groups, all dressed smartly but casually, engaging with modern technology in an office or recording studio, or reading with a child. All the photographs contained written or printed messages emphasising various benefits of learning: teachers of adults are patient and thorough and respect their students; returning to learning can bring a new and positive identity; learning can improve *your* family life and *your* children's life chances (italics added). The biographies had a common structure. An obstacle or barrier impeding effectiveness in employment or parental duties is removed by a learning encounter; a happy outcome relating to work, domestic harmony or personal development is achieved or imminent. The stories are similar to those told by Judith at the Loomstown awards evenings and those related about the winners at the national adult learner award events (Spear, 2009, Tuckett, 2012). They are powerful examples of how positioning people in deficit discourses and redemption from lost situations are so firmly embedded in discourses of educational success after an unpromising beginning. They are presented as qualitative data, adding another dimension to the quantitative data found elsewhere in the *Skills for Life* document. None of the Loomstown research participants or their teachers had actually read or seen the document, although they appeared to have been influenced indirectly by its points of view. Whatever the reservations of researchers or commentators might have been about the way the *Skills for Life* document positioned the student participants, all those at Loomstown believed the project had been ideal for them and their needs. .

Skills for Life (2001) addressed concerns about the lack of basic skills in literacy, numeracy and IT. The groups it listed as likely to lack these skills would usually be expected to be members of the working class. It was certainly the case that the Access courses offered at Loomstown were established to attract working class students. With this in mind, the following section offers a brief history of class in Britain in the past 200 years, part of the important background to a clearer understanding of the educational stories of the participants in this research.

THE CHANGING CONFIGURATIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS

The process by which people are identified as belonging to a particular class is not objective or based purely on economic status, although economic status plays a significant part. The judgement is as much a moral judgement as an economic one. The social class of the women in this research was central to their return to education. The Loomstown *Skills for Life* project targeted working class adults living in areas designated as deprived when recruiting to its level one and two Basic Skills Access courses. Those among them who aspired to higher education were setting out for a destination traditionally reached by relatively few working class people (Bowl, 2001).

Developing taxonomies of lower socioeconomic groups

Class became a focus of interest during the Industrial Revolution which began in the late eighteenth century. Initially, there were three broad categories: the upper, middle and working class. The working class, comprising new communities of factory workers, was seen as a threat to the *status quo*. Its behaviour was demonised and pathologised: ‘degenerate,’ ‘dangerous,’ ‘contagious,’ ‘promiscuous,’ and ‘savage’ (Skeggs, 1997a, p. 5); ‘reduced morally and intellectually to bestiality,’ and, ‘a race wholly apart’ ((Engels, 1884/1958. pp. 31 &. 36).

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the categorisation of classes changed and subdivided to reflect the changing social and political context. Runciman's (1990) taxonomy contained seven classes rather than the original three.

Table 2.1: Percentage of social classes in Population (Source: Runciman, 1990)

Class	Examples of Members	Percentage in 1990
Upper	Major owners, the most senior managers, the highly marketable.	0.1-0.2%
Upper Middle	Higher grade professionals, senior civil servants, managers	10%
Middle Middle	Lower grade professionals (e.g. teachers, nurses), middle managers.	20%
Lower Middle	White collar clerical workers	20%
Skilled Working	Skilled craftspersons and tradespersons, some clerical workers	20%
Unskilled Working	Shop assistants, labourers, cleaners	30%?
Underclass	Those relying on benefits, unfit to work or otherwise unemployable	5%

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the categorisation of classes changed and subdivided to reflect the changing social and political context. Runciman's (1990) seven classes reflected the Thatcherite era that had, 'ushered in a new kind of cultural confidence from those with money to spend' (Savage, 2015, p. 304) and legitimated, 'the flaunting of wealth,' (Savage, 2015, p. 304. At the bottom was, 'the underclass' (Table 2.1). Some of the media at the time invoked the, 'cycle of deprivation' theory that welfare dependency, a loaded term, encouraged those supported financially by the welfare state to become over-dependent on tax payers' hard earned money (Savage, 2015). Runciman's model divided the working class: into three: the skilled working class, the unskilled working class and the underclass. The categories were sufficiently broad to include all the participants in this research. The underclass comprised people relying on benefits, unfit to work or otherwise unemployable (Runciman, 1990). The description seems problematic as people's reliance on benefits is sometimes temporary. Some unemployed people find new jobs; some single

mothers acquire new partners. The underclass might be better seen as a fluid group within the working class, not a fixed one outside it (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992).

Standing (2011) includes the working class among his seven classes, but reflects its changed status: a shrinking group of skilled and unskilled workers once united in social solidarity, but no longer having industrial muscle. Standing (2011) and Savage (2015) both highlight the insecure situation of many benefit claimants, finding themselves on low paid, short term or zero hours' contracts because of neo-liberal policies. Employers' 'labour market flexibility' policies (Standing, 2011, p. 20) transfer the risks of employment and need for protection by the employer to the employee, robbing him or her of an occupational identity. Since the situation of members of this group is precarious, both Savage and Standing call them, *the precariat*, a term suggesting defencelessness and victimhood. For Standing, the precariat is just above the unemployed and the socially ill misfits, but below the working class. The precariat will pose a threat to social order as their anger grows because of the gradual erosion of their status as citizens. They are, 'denizens' (Standing, 2011, p. 15), their rights limited civilly, culturally, socially, medically, economically and politically. They are not a homogeneous group and may include young or old, immigrants or members of the indigenous population. They may blame one another for contributing to their situation, rather than recognising each other as fellows in the plight. This research may include five participants belonging to the precariat in Standing's sense. Savage (2015) uses *precariat* in a slightly different sense which includes all the people outside the other six classes.

Standing (2011) sees the working class as a group in decline with falling income and insecure position in the labour market, a compelling reason for educational initiatives aiming to equip them for employment in twenty first century Britain. The Social Mobility Commission (2016a) data supports this claim. There has been a drop of 5% in real terms

wages for several million families since 2003 and a 15 per cent drop in the hourly pay of young workers. The Commission predicts nine million low-skilled people will be competing for four million jobs by 2022, when there will be a three million shortfall in the

Table 2.2: new configurations of social classes (Source: Standing, 2011)

Class	Description
Elite	The very rich and politically influential and philanthropic
Salariat	Those in stable full time employment with pensions and paid holidays and possibly with aspirations to join the elite.
Proficiants	Technician professionals with highly marketable skills, earning high incomes as contractors or consultants
Working class	The diminishing number of skilled and unskilled workers once bound together in social solidarity but now without their industrial muscle.
Precariat	The precariously employed and housed, extremely vulnerable to the movement of market forces
Unemployed	Those without work
The socially ill misfits	Those unable for whatever reason to contribute to society and its accumulation of wealth.

labour force for the 15 million high-skilled jobs then available. A diversion of funding from second chance further education to mainly low quality apprenticeships in low-skill sectors unrelated to the nation's skills needs has meant only one in eight of the children in the bottom two income quintiles, which includes the research participants' families, attends university in contrast to almost half of those in the population at large (Social Mobility Commission, 2016b). The data highlight the importance of educational projects such as the one in Loomstown. Involvement in, and commitment to education may offer traditionally working class families a more secure future and create opportunities to take more demanding jobs than the unskilled ones traditionally filled by those with few qualifications. Table 2.3 drawing on Savage and the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015) further emphasises the importance of university education in drastically improving a person's life chances.

Table 2.3 The percentage of the population from the new social classes (Savage, 2015) in the population as a whole; and the percentage of graduates and non-graduates in those social classes in the population as a whole based on the Great British Class Survey: (Source: Savage, 2015, pp. 174, 228, 230).

Class	All	Graduates	Non-graduates
Elite	6	15	3
Established middle class	25	45	19
Technical middle class	6	6	19
New affluent workers	15	8	5
Traditional working class	14	7	15
Emerging service workers	19	16	21
Precariat	15	3	18

Working class women, class and gender

Skeggs (1997a), in her analysis of class and gender emphasised that class, gender and race intersect in the construction of class identity. The poor are depicted, as, ‘a race apart’ (Engels, 1884/1958, p. 361). The early class divisions were constructed as moral ones and working class women, based on their appearance and middle class interpretations of it, were seen as poor wives and mothers and dangerous. In this construction, working class women fell far short of the idealised domesticity of middle class wives, lacking the respectability seen as a middle class signifier, which constructed women as passive and dependent, in control of their well concealed sexuality; responsible wives and mothers, ensuring their children were cared for, protected and educated.

Respectability is a state sensed most keenly by those who do not have it, that is, working class women, positioned by others as wild, undisciplined, sexualised and vulgar. For them, their class and gender intersected and interacted with one another to produce tensions and anxieties. Skeggs argues that working class women deal with their lack of respectability by distancing themselves from and disidentifying with the members of their class they consider poor, deprived, dangerous and degrading, positioning themselves as, ‘respectable’

working class women (Skeggs, 1997a).

In the recent past, women's social class was generally seen as mediated through their relationship with men. Although there have been attempts to take different approaches, the foregrounding of men and the assumption that women are peripheral to the work place has meant their personal history and identity have tended to be ignored in spite of the argument that a woman's social class can be associated more closely with her qualifications than the class of her partner. The privileging of men in determining women's social class also disregards both the important role of mothers in their children's education and the complex intersections of gender, race and class (Reay, 1998). The need to work or not is seen by many as a woman's class indicator, but that need is often gendered in discussions by reference to a mother's 'need to work' or not. A father's 'need to work' is constructed in a different way. Class is not confined to the economic, but enters into all spheres of life. (Reay, 1998). There is a need to focus on process as well as position, and to recognise that a woman's rôle as a mother plays an important part in the formation of her own and her children's class. To become middle class, children need the right brains and the right mothers (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). Exploring social class through (usually male) occupations obscures large parts of the social class story. Reay's (1998) insights directed attention in the research to the way in which participants fostered the educational progress of their own children.

The middle class squeeze

There appears to be an overlap between the concerns of the squeezed middle class (Erikson, 2014) and the meritocratic discourse. The squeezed middle class is not persuaded by the importance in the democratic discourse of social justice and improving the educational opportunities of the poorer social classes. It is generally acknowledged that the middle class has experienced a squeeze, mainly financial, in recent years

(Dallinger, 2013), although how the middle class is defined in this assertion varies considerably. All members of the middle class have seen increased demands on their income by, for example, the withdrawal of child benefits and the introduction of university fees, although the high earners will have been hardly affected by the increased financial demands (Lansley, 2010). The middle class continues to take 40% of the places in the prestigious Russell Group universities, while young people from poorer families are still two and a half times less likely to attend university at all than those from more privileged backgrounds. At the present rate of progress, it will take 50 years to close the gap (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015).

Nevertheless, in one analysis (Whittaker & Bailey, 2012), the working population was divided into three groups: the benefit reliant (the bottom 10%); the low to middle earners (the next 40%); the higher earners (the top 50%). 11 million low-to-middle earners with incomes between £12,000 and £30,000 were identified as ‘squeezed’, too poor to gain from private markets and too rich to get substantial state support. Their share of national final incomes had fallen from 34%, after tax and benefits, to 29% in the eleven years up to 2009. The income of the bottom 10% fell 2% to 4% in the same period, while that of the top 50% rose 7% to 67% during that time. Drawing on the same data, it has been asserted that in spite of the widespread belief that the United Kingdom is suffering a middle class recession, those most affected are the low-to-middle earners (Lansley, 2009). However, the perception that the middle class in general is being squeezed means that middle class people in general are likely to see themselves as under threat from those in the poorer socioeconomic classes, a view reinforced by newspapers to which they might subscribe. In January, 2017, under *The Sunday Times* headline, ‘Poorer students get easier access to university,’ is written, ‘Leading universities are planning to lower entry requirements for more working class applicants – despite figures showing they are less likely to finish their studies or get first class degrees’ (Griffiths et al, 2017). The implication is that students

who are economically and academically poorer are taking the place of expensively educated, high achieving, middle class applicants, a view which the reporters assume will be given a sympathetic reading by *Sunday Times* readers.

Finch (1993) set out to demonstrate that the conceptualisation of the working class came originally from the middle class because it wanted to distance itself from what it saw as a degenerate group. It seems that in a period when the middle class sees itself as under threat from increasing demands on its resources, it will look unfavourably on working class applicants construed as encroaching unfairly on its higher education territory and taking places previously taken by middle class children, while not considering too closely whether or not it is fair that the middle class can buy an education not available to most working class children. In such a climate, the middle class is unlikely to be enthusiastic about increasing access and widening participation among poorer socioeconomic groups, so initiatives such as those introduced at Loomstown may not be welcomed.

Conclusion

This chapter began by reviewing the history of policy relating to access and widening participation since the Second World War in both higher and further education. The intention was to follow the changes, developments and strategies employed to dismantle and circumvent the barriers in the two sectors to the point where educationally unqualified, working class adults, such as the research participants, could return to education and in some cases eventually become university graduates. The *Skills for Life* (2001) policy document which introduced the basic skills courses to which the Loomstown students were recruited is given special attention. Attention is drawn to the negative way in which the members of the target group of mainly working class people without basic literacy and numeracy skills are positioned within deficit discourses.

This was followed by a review of the changing way in which the working class has been conceptualised during the 250 years since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to learn how and why barriers were erected and have proved so difficult to remove. The configurations of class in the later years of the twentieth century included some motivated by a concern for justice and social equality, reflecting a growing concern for the position of working class women and the intersecting influence of class and gender on their situation. Since all the students in this research were working class women, this topic seemed particularly important.

Finally, the chapter included a brief review of the phenomenon of ‘the squeezed middle class,’ how accurately it represented the situation of all those who see themselves as middle class and what effect such a perception might have on middle class attitudes to policies aimed at improving the lot of working class people, which might be seen as threatening middle class interests.

In the next chapter, the model of barriers to higher education will be analysed more closely. The competing meritocratic discourse and democratic discourse and their approaches to widening participation in higher education will be contrasted and compared. The concept of misrecognition, an example of a virtually invisible institutional barrier to some higher education courses for some non-traditional learners, will be interrogated. Finally, the three forms of capital in Schuller’s model (2004) and its relevance will be explained.

CHAPTER THREE

BARRIERS TO FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter identifies the main issues influencing the possibility of non-traditional learners benefiting from a return to education in spite of the range of barriers continually and repeatedly confronting them. It begins with an analysis of the concept of barriers to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges met in both further and higher education by non-traditional learners. The fitness for purpose of the barriers concept is scrutinised as are any difficulties created by using such a model to examine learners' experiences. A close analysis follows of the three kinds of barrier (dispositional, situational and institutional) faced by non-traditional adult learners. Next, there is further analysis of access and widening participation and their contested meanings with an examination of the competing meritocratic and democratic discourses that shape the struggles, assumptions and practices determining how non-traditional learners are identified and selected. After this, there is an examination of the concept of *misrecognition* in three forms, cultural, linguistic and social, how it is defined and its effects, particularly on members of under-represented groups in or aspiring to higher education. The *recognition* which is denied to these groups can be defined in more than one way, but is used here in the sense of 'adequate regard' for a fellow human being (Laitinen, 2010). Finally, there is an explanation and evaluation of the three capitals model (Schuller, 2004) and how the capitals might be drawn upon by adult students to deal with the barriers they face. It is acknowledged that other forms of capital, particularly *cultural capital*, have been proposed as resources and there is an explanation of why it is not found in this model.

THE CONCEPT OF BARRIERS

There is a marked difference between the socio-economic classes in their uptake of adult education. The more secure a person's socio-economic position, the more likely he or she is to participate (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). There are nine, partially overlapping groups, all more or less likely to belong to poorer socio-economic groups and to be underrepresented in adult education: 1) people with few educational qualifications; 2) people with basic educational needs; 3) people on low incomes, unemployed, living on benefit; 4) the unskilled or semi-skilled; 5) members of ethnic minorities; 6) older people; 7) mothers with young children; 8) people with mental or physical disabilities; 9) people living in rural areas (McGivney, 1990).

Cross (1981) explained the underrepresentation of the nine groups in terms of the barriers they were likely to face, although she emphasised that without a strong motivation those from the poorer social groups would be unlikely to enrol or persevere no matter what might be done to move barriers blocking their way. Since all the research participants belonged to at least three and as many as five of the nine groups, it seemed appropriate to investigate their experience in the light of the barriers they could face; the effect those barriers might have on their experience; and how they or others working on their behalf might negotiate them. Other models of barriers to adult education had been proposed or developed (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982; Nkomo et al., 2004), but none appeared to add significantly to those identified in Cross's model.

The concept of *barriers* has limitations. The metaphor it draws on is visual, creating an image of a material object, which may be constraining because it evokes images that could limit the range of possible responses to the situation it represents. Barriers are dismantled, broken down, crossed or removed. However, some educational barriers, certain institutional practices and attitudes for example, may be hidden from view, making it easy

to be unaware of them or of the need to react to them. The barriers concept could usefully be balanced by the more positive image of bridge building (Kettley, 2007), making the barriers seem less intimidating and negotiating them more straightforward. Furthermore, a barrier suggests the here and now, yet from the moment a person is born and possibly before that, barriers and bridges are being constructed by the subcultures and practices of different social groups. Thus, the creation of means-tested grants immediately builds a bridge to higher education, not only for impoverished students at the time, but also for students without independent means who come after them. Similarly, a switch to a student loans system may immediately create a barrier deterring some potential students afraid of incurring debt from applying and continues to deter people in a similar position in the future for as long as the loans system remains in place.

In the light of this analysis, it is suggested that the barriers-centred approach should be balanced by an equal concern for the bridges and breakthrough strategies designed to improve access to higher education and to widen participation. Moreover, research should adopt a more longitudinal approach to include the experiences of childhood in all its stages, since that is where the building of barriers and bridges begins (Kettley (2007).

Cross's model includes three kinds of barrier:

Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional barriers are created by negative perceptions of oneself and of education, whether based on one's own experiences of school or on preconceptions of what further or higher education might be like. Dispositional barriers make it difficult for potential or enrolled learners to see themselves as learners feeling at home in or likely to succeed in the academy (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997). Dispositional barriers include those erected by competing loyalties: to family, self-respect and gendered self-expectations, so the research

sought them in the participants' experiences.

Dispositional barriers may be reinforced by practices or policies that take away or undermine a student's confidence. Previous research into working class women in education highlighted some of the background and circumstances of working class women's lives that could reduce their commitment to education or make their perseverance less likely. It concluded that, 'increasing working class women's involvement (in education) is a slow and painstaking process' (McGivney (1990, p. 94). Some in McGivney's research had already faced many difficulties: low academic achievement at school followed by early pregnancy and parenthood, either as a single mother or with a partner. Some had done low paid work for a time and then raised a family (McGivney, 1990). Lone mothers could experience poverty, poor accommodation and isolation, be prone to depression and anxiety, and lack parenting skills. Women returning to work when their children were older were often in poorly paid, part-time or temporary employment, sometimes working unsocial hours. For some, this triggered enrolment on an Access course in the hope of improving their lot, as happened with the individual award winners in this research, but for many, it marked the beginning of a lifetime of undervalued and low paid work (McGivney, 1990). The lack of educational qualifications had left some with very little cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000) as the return to work painfully reminded them (McGivney, 1990). Returning to learning could put relationships and friendships at risk (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). However, for some, benefits were gained. Family self-esteem increased. Furthermore, their children's lives improved materially because of the increased earning power the parents eventually attained and academically because the parent's example encouraged them to commit themselves to education and eventually enabled the family to enjoy the capital gains learning could bring (Bamber and Tett, 2000).

Negative perceptions of self or education stemming from poor school experiences or

family perceptions that education has nothing to offer can be formidable barriers and are likely to be greater among working class, older, female or ethnic minority students (McGivney, 1990). The fear of failure is constant, considerable and burdensome, particularly in further education and continues to be so in higher education, particularly for older students (Rautopure and Vaisenen, 2001). It can create a formidable dispositional barrier. The fear is understandable. The consequences of failure can be materially and psychologically very damaging. Further education level three Access students who failed to move on to degree courses, often through circumstances beyond their control and through no fault of theirs, faced a future of poverty and material hardship, feelings of hopelessness and guilt, a strong sense of failure and the loss of a possible escape from poverty and isolation (Reay et al., 2002). Awareness of these risks could persuade prospective students that the courses were not for them. Dispositional barriers could also be erected by the strain on family relationships and the fear that the damage could be permanent and a student's class identity lost. Anxieties could be reinforced by awareness of the damage done to self-respect and self-esteem if the venture ended in failure, meaning a considerable investment of time, effort and money had yielded nothing (Brine and Waller, 2004). There are several reasons why students before and after enrolling might erect dispositional barriers, which suggests that building confidence and self-esteem as part of a centre's policy, ethos and course content could yield rich dividends in encouraging, maintaining and increasing students' confidence and commitment.

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers can be found in the personal circumstances and situations of individual students, impeding or preventing them becoming or continuing to be students (McGivney, 1990). Some barriers are likely to be both situational and dispositional because the adverse situation generates dispositional reluctance to negotiate it. Class, gender and ethnicity can generate attitudes, expectations and perceptions among a learner's family members that

may erect strong barriers to educational participation (Burke, 2012). Some working class women face strong disapproval from partners, families and friends, who consider educational courses incompatible with their family responsibilities, such as child care, looking after the home and supporting the domestic economy through part time work. Many working class people, particularly men, reject the idea that education and especially higher education has any relevance to their lives and fear it as a threat to their own class identity (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Speaking in 2013, the then Universities Minister, David Willets, considered the situation so serious, he wanted white, working-class boys to be categorised as a disadvantaged community and made the focus of an intense recruitment campaign into education beyond the school leaving age (Willets, 2013a, 2013b; Garner, 2013).

Situational barriers can have different causes. Even when students enrol successfully, some in both further and higher education need two or three attempts to complete their courses because their studies have been interrupted by changing domestic situations. Their university choice is almost always constrained by their circumstances and dictated by proximity, travel-time and cost, all factors more influential than subject choice, which, ideally, should be the most important criterion (Reay et al., 2002; Bariso, 2008).

Sometimes, the competing demands of family, work responsibilities and study commitments can be overwhelming and make academic progress much slower than students might have anticipated (McGivney, 1990).

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers are found in the practices, procedures, ethos and assumptions of a student's education institution or the institutions of the wider society, such as local or national government, the press and other media. They can create barriers directly or indirectly impeding enrolment, continuation or completion of courses (Burke, 2012).

There are five common institutional barriers, mainly experienced in further education, but also in higher education. 1) Courses are scheduled at unsuitable times or, 2) offered in inconvenient or remote places more than two miles from learners' homes, the maximum distance most returning learners are prepared to travel. 3) The courses may have no interest, practical application or relevance for adults seeking to improve their lives through education. 4) There may be poor registration and administrative arrangements or, 5) a lack of information and publicity (Cross, 1981; Bariso, 2008). Many of these barriers are caused by shortcomings in the ethos and organisation of educational institutions or in teachers' practices. The two may overlap. Poor registration arrangements may include registering students for courses unlikely to be useful and which they do not want. Registration procedures may sometimes serve the institution's administrative needs rather than the educational needs of the students (Bariso, 2008).

Teachers are the most influential people on students in further or higher education because they are the key power holders and have the closest contact with students. All the research participants named teachers who had been particularly supportive and on whom they had come to rely. National and local policies are mediated to the students through their teachers (Tett and MacLachlan, 2008). If the teachers position students within deficit discourses, as government policy sometimes seems to encourage (DfEE, 2001), the students are less likely to make progress (Oughton, 2007). Most FE teachers are women. Some have been found to have a less professional approach than a situation requires (Tett and MacLachlan, 2008). They may support students overprotectively, hindering their development towards independence by deskilling, deprofessionalising and infantilising them (Simmons, 2008; Leathwood, 2001). The development of inclusion policies has brought more challenging and vulnerable students into further education, certainly the case at Loomstown, which has shifted some teachers' practices away from higher order subject-based teaching towards keeping order and dealing with students' welfare needs, which may

make it difficult to ensure students make academic progress (Simmons, 2008). Teachers may view more challenging students as a disruptive threat, which makes it more likely those students will be deemed unsuitable for their courses and invited to drop out or not discouraged if they consider leaving. Students who leave the courses in such circumstances are likely to face poorer employment prospects; low or minimal educational gains and poor economic status, although they could be capable of achieving more academic progress. (Bathmaker, 2007). Students' working class *habitus* may already have disposed them to question if they are in the right place, so they are fairly easily persuaded that higher status courses are not for them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). Such students can be steered all too quickly towards low status courses unlikely to improve their situation and simply reproducing class and gender inequality for yet another generation (Colley et al., 2003). Teachers are assumed to know better, so are not challenged if they decide to channel students into less prestigious courses or leave them unaware of the low status of their basic skills courses (Tett and MacLachlan, 2008). Nevertheless, students are not inevitably condemned to poor educational experiences. Many further education teachers, believing further education represents students' last hope, are fully committed to improving their students' life chances. They remove barriers by compensating for the deficiencies of compulsory education and responding positively to the difficult task of providing challenging learning for challenging students (Clarke et al., 2002; Jephcote, 2008). This encourages some students to develop increasingly positive learner identities, enabling them to augment their social capital significantly (Tett and MacLachlan, 2007):

‘The evidence suggests that the ‘virtuous circle’ of social capital is operating and affecting those who have engaged in learning. Increased confidence and self-esteem impact on family, social and work relationships, thereby adding to the learner’s social capital’ (Tett and MacLachlan, 2007, p. 163).

Researchers have recommended that courses be held at reasonable times in accessible places with provision made for students' child care responsibilities. Teachers, particularly males, should be more sensitive to the many particular demands (family commitments; part-time work, sometimes for long hours; study time and assignment deadlines) made on women students (McDonald and Stratton, 1998). Emotional and practical support should be available to students with financial or other difficulties (Cross, 1981; Bariso, 2008). Adapting teaching methods and assignment requirements, particularly at the beginning of courses when students are unsure and seeking reassurance and encouragement could be very beneficial. The requirements of particular courses should be carefully explained and students allowed three attempts at early assignments. The assignments should be short, marked immediately and returned quickly to ensure students received praise and encouragement or further support if appropriate, especially in the first year (Bamber and Tett, 1999, 2000). A sympathetic teacher could enable a pressurised student, who might otherwise give up, to persevere and succeed (McDonald and Stratton, 1998).

Male students, even when in a minority, have been prone to dominate mixed groups, assume group leadership and the right to speak for female students and summarise their views (MacDonald and Stratton, 1998). In women-only groups, women could flourish more easily (McGivney, (1990). Women often drew considerable support from one another, making it more likely they would persevere (Bamber and Tett, 2000). Unlike many males, who preferred to keep their domestic and learning identities separate, most women were happy to talk to female colleagues about their home lives and difficulties and found it helpful. This suggested both men and women might find being taught separately more supportive and congenial (MacDonald and Stratton, 1998). These findings were helpful in coming to understand why the female ethos of the Loomstown Access courses was so attractive to the women who taught and learned there, although it deterred all but a few men from enrolling.

The introduction of student fees, seen by many as another institutional barrier, was considered likely to further discourage poorer people from entering further or higher education particularly as a degree no longer guaranteed well paid, long term employment (Gorard et al., 2007, Wilkins et al., 2015). It would seem particularly likely to affect participants in this research, all from families with limited incomes. A student loan could be a more risk-prone investment that would take a long time to repay and increase anxiety about long term debt (Milburn, 2009). Fees as a barrier to learning became more prominent during the research as the government announced it would begin charging for some courses, previously free, which research participants hoped to take.

Institutional barriers such as those concerning student fees and loans were erected by government policies. Some other institutional barriers were embedded in the culture and practices of government and higher education and not easily visible, if seen at all (Bowl, 2001). Barriers of this type could easily be missed in an analysis of institutional barriers, one of the reasons why the barriers model has been criticised as an oversimplification (McGivney, 1990).

COMPETING DISCOURSES INFLUENCING ACCESS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

In higher education, *access* is concerned with admissions processes and their fairness, while *widening participation* is concerned with making more places available to those who can benefit. How this might be achieved is contested.

Widening participation can be understood using at least two contrasting criteria, the meritocratic and the democratic. Each of them could be said to belong to a different discourse, a different, 'way a set of meanings, representations and images comes together

to produce a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995, p. 48). A discourse can embody, 'a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance' (Diamond and Quinby, 1988, p. 185), which implies that the prevailing discourses are those constructed by the most powerful people, often so successfully they are accepted as the truth and strongly influence the way in which other people come to understand the world. The powerful discourses push other, competing discourses towards the edge, where they have little influence, although there is no intrinsic reason why this should be so (Karlberg, 2005). A discourse does not necessarily reflect any pre-existing truth, but produces its own 'regime of truth,' heavily influencing how people understand ideas (Foucault, 1991). Concepts, such as, 'widening participation,' 'inclusion,' and 'exclusion,' can become discourses when ideas and practices are brought together to define those concepts in a particular way that ignores or marginalises other ways of representing them: 'Contemporary discourses of widening participation have emerged and have in turn shaped the discourses over who has the right to higher education and who does not' (Burke, 2012, p. 9).

Some widening participation discourses construct some participants as disadvantaged, non-traditional and having potential, as has been found in this research.. Discourses can create binary divisions in which one term (e.g. *middle class*) is the positive norm and the other (e.g. *working class*) the negative deficit, constructing the *working class* as inferior, lacking high culture, information, aspiration and knowledge (Burke, 2012). A clear example of this is the negative way in which the construction of the identity of working class women involves an intersection of gender, class and race that treats them as pathologised and barbaric, as well as sexually and socially threatening (Skeggs, 1997a). These could be described as examples of *deficit discourses* because they place certain people, groups, behaviours and ideas in inferior social positions. A *deficit discourse* defines people, 'by what they lack in relation to arbitrary defined norms' (Tett and McLachlan, 2008, p.663).

‘Arbitrary’ could be considered a poor choice of word, since the norms are embedded in structural and historical processes determined by their context. They are constructed, but not arbitrary.

The meritocratic discourse

The meritocratic view of widening participation, which seems to overlap with some of the values of the squeezed middle class, argues that the places in the most prestigious universities should go to the most highly qualified, even if this means the higher social classes are disproportionately well represented. The meritocratic view has its roots in the perspective of functionalist sociology on the distribution of labour in the wider society. Parsons (1951) drawing on Durkheim (1893/1960) contended that, if social stratification is based on occupation, it benefits the social order. Modern industrial society requires specialised occupational divisions, but some occupations have more value than others, so attract higher remuneration. Parsons believed people generally recognise this and accept their place in the unequal social hierarchy it creates, although he does not support this claim with evidence. He believes stratification motivates people to strive to rise as high as possible on the social ladder; educational qualifications are a fair means of allocating people to their appropriate occupation and status (Davis and Moore (1967)). The most talented and enterprising people drive economic growth, thereby raising everybody’s income and living standard. Social inequality is a reasonable price to pay for this (Saunders, 1996). For Parsons (1951), equality is to be found in equal opportunity in the sense that all have an equal chance to obtain educational qualifications, which is true in the sense that all can enrol for the examinations. However, not all have access to the best educational preparation, which is more available to the rich than to the poor. Parsons asserts that differentiated achievement justifies differentiated reward.

The deficit discourses within which Loomstown learners are positioned by the meritocratic discourse and from which the learning centre positions itself as seeking to rescue them are found in *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001). The deficit discourse is constructed by using phrases such as, ‘at risk of exclusion... from advantages that others take for granted... low motivation... children more likely to struggle at school... more prone to health problems... suffer(ing) from social exclusion.’ (pp. 1 & 8). Such phrases become the framework for a narrative, implicitly presented as beginning in deprivation, but ending with success, if only for the few.

The democratic discourse

The democrats argue that the meritocratic discourse positions under-represented groups within a deficit discourse, defining people, ‘by what they lack,’ and unjustifiably excludes them from full participation in society in general. The participants in this research were members of the underrepresented groups, so likely to be adversely affected by such a positioning. The leaders in society are able to impose the ‘truth’ of their constructed hegemonic discourse on others, silencing in the process the discursive truth claims of the other less powerful groups they marginalise, exclude and pathologise (Burke, 2012).

Education is used by the wealthy and powerful to maintain their privileged place in society and to ensure the reproduction of existing social structures. The higher social classes are disproportionately represented in higher education because their cultural and social capital is shared and valued by the universities, so more likely to be accepted as an indication they will succeed: the greater a university’s prestige, the higher the proportion of students from privileged backgrounds. This cannot be explained by innately superior intelligence among the higher social groups. Independent, fee-paying schools ensure the children of the wealthy do well whatever their ability, if necessary, by using membership of powerful networks to obtain well remunerated positions. (Kynaston, 2008). Many middle class families maintain social inequalities by moving to prosperous areas served by high

performing state schools to ensure their children's educational success is assured (Pratt-Adams et al., 2010), which works against the interests of those, such as the participants in this research, who gain few qualifications in schools which may not have a strong commitment to ensuring they do as well as they possibly can. Consequently, they are seen as justifiably placed on the lowest rung of the educational ladder.

It is argued that parental class position is a more important factor than intellectual ability in influencing academic attainment (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), which seems to be supported by the findings cited in the previous paragraph that upper and middle class families use their social influence and position to ensure their children succeed whether through educational opportunity and attainment or through membership of influential networks. If those from the higher social classes are assumed to have achieved their success through merit alone, then those from the lower social classes who have not managed to do this are being positioned in deficit discourses on the assumption they have shown themselves incapable of matching the achievements of the successful in a fair and equal competition. Although various governments have tried to address issues of unequal educational opportunity, as the review of policy landmarks in chapter two indicated, they have made little difference to the relative educational attainments of the different social classes since the 1940s (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). The democratic discourse seeks to continue to change the attitudes and practices of academic institutions to ensure that the ability of under-represented social groups is recognised and fostered (Burke, 2012). Third level Access courses are currently one means of achieving this and demonstrating that those who lack traditional A level qualifications for university entrance can still benefit from a university education. However, they seem to be focused on preparing students for less prestigious vocational degrees, which was certainly the case at Loomstown. Their more modest achievement is that they give non-traditional adult learners the opportunity to improve their achievements and gain greater opportunities than their previous learning

experiences have done. They encourage adult returners to learning to be ambitious, but not too ambitious.

If a *meritocratic* criterion is used to allocate the increased number of places made available in higher education, the places on the most prestigious courses will continue being allocated to those achieving the highest grades in traditional A level examinations, which simply increases participation without widening it. The expectation would be that the social mix would stay much the same. If a democratic criterion is used, university places are made available to all those, irrespective of their origin, who desire and could be shown to benefit from higher education (McNamee and Miller, 2014), but with the realisation that such a practice will not in itself change the social order.

The democratic approach is built on a commitment to social justice, which it believes is being denied by unequal distribution of places. It wants more equal access for all social groups, and argues that the disadvantages of under-represented groups require a compensatory response from higher education institutions (McNamee and Miller, 2014). Widening participation in this context relates to the promotion of activities and initiatives intended to identify and recruit people from groups previously under-represented at university and still underrepresented in those with the highest status - marginalised socioeconomic groups and cultures, women, disabled, ethnic minorities and older people - and ensure their success when they are there, an important requirement, as the previously under-represented must justify their place on a course by satisfactory achievement (Tummons et al., 2013). The situation is complicated, because of the huge increase in the number of institutions designated as universities, particularly since 1992, and in the number and type of courses being offered at degree level, which could persuade people that the problems have been solved. However, there is no easy way of allocating places fairly in prestigious institutions to those without high traditional qualifications. The increased

number enrolled in universities has gone some way to addressing the problem, but has been achieved without disturbing the social *status quo*.

The more prestigious universities still take a disproportionate percentage from the higher socioeconomic classes. 7.3% of pupils, mostly from the wealthier classes attend fee paying schools. One consequence is that the wealthier classes are over-represented in the most prestigious professions: law, medicine, politics, business, the civil service and the Church. Although university attendance is increasing across the social classes, degrees have been devalued by their increasing number (Bourdieu, 1993) and the status of a degree will depend on the prestige of the university awarding it. Independently educated students are more likely to attend the highest status universities, Oxford and Cambridge. State educated middle class students are more likely to attend the Russell Group universities, such as London and Manchester, the next highest in the academic hierarchy. The working class students are more likely to choose post-1992 universities, the least prestigious (Reay et al., 2005). Most working class aspirants will not have had access to the particular cultural and intellectual capital highly valued by admissions tutors and available to those in the higher classes (Burke, 2012). Graduates of the post-1992 universities are less likely to secure a traditional graduate job (Furlong and Carmel, 2005). All these factors mean that universities reproduce rather than address the injustice of social inequalities in the population (Burke, 2012). The nature and level of access is not going to bring about major social change (Tummons et al., 2013). Higher education benefits the national economy, but neglects the interests and abilities of the working class in its most prestigious institutions (Archer et al., 2003). Because of this, the nation should have a clear idea of those to whom it wants higher education to be extended and why (Tight, 1996). Initiatives such as level three Access courses offered in Moorsmills College and similar institutions are important steps along the way, but there is still further to go.

MISRECOGNITION

The analysis of *misrecognition* is placed here because it is an example of an institutional barrier constructed within a meritocratic discourse that can disadvantage higher education applicants, particularly working class applicants such as the participants in this research, because of their class, gender or ethnicity. Their lack of the characteristics and qualities that are part of the middle class applicants' culture may be misrecognised as an inability to benefit from particular higher education courses.

Misrecognition is a controversial term and is used in slightly different senses by different theorists. The term is used here to signify a lack of adequate regard (Laitinen, 2010). In Bourdieu's concept there is an implicit challenge to the idea of barriers in education to be confronted and dismantled, because in his understanding the barriers of which misrecognition can be a part are intrinsic to the education system as a fundamental agency in constructing and maintaining social order (Bourdieu, 2003; James, 2015). The education system fails to recognise the true nature of the social factors determining an individual's educational career and the powerful influence those factors exert on the particular path she follows (Bourdieu, 2003). Particular educational qualifications are misrecognised as evidence of their holders' natural right to the social advancement that results from educational success. A lack of them in poorer students, such as the research participants, may be misrecognised as a sign they should be denied that social advancement. The poorer students' misrecognition is seen as an unfortunate outcome in an essentially sound system, whose weaknesses can be tackled by dismantling the visible barriers standing between them and academic success (James, 2015).

Fraser's (2007) emphasis is different from Bourdieu's, arguing that some socioeconomic groups are prevented from taking part in education as adults because of economic inequalities, that is, distributive injustice experienced as a lack of resources preventing

them from competing with others as equals. They are reckoned to lack cultural capital and the status inequality which leads to misrecognition of their ability to participate in higher education.

The concern that there are more serious, less easily visible, barriers than, for example, some unsatisfactory practical course arrangements, deserves serious attention. The expectation that candidates will have control of particular academic literacy practices before their higher education courses begin could be considered unreasonable, as they, like the research participants, may have had little experience of those practices, feel very insecure about them and need a continuing exposure to academic genres if they are to internalise them gradually. This is being acknowledged in some of the newer universities and degree courses, in which bridges are being built to give students the time they need to learn the language variety of the academy (Bamber et al., 1997). Nevertheless, it is still possible for a person to be misrecognised because she is unfamiliar, and less comfortable, with the academy's conventions in speaking and writing.

Mary, a 22 year old black, working class woman undergraduate, trying to understand why her written arguments about race were dismissed by her tutor as irrelevant, said,

‘When I am writing, I don’t know who it is. It’s not me...It’s like I have to go into a different person. I have to change my frame of mind... my way of thinking and everything. It’s just like a stranger.’ (Lillis, 2003, p. 202). Mary saw herself, not merely as ‘a fish out of water,’ but also as a stranger in the culturally foreign land of academic writing, where she did not know the language, believed she was not being heard or valued, and feared she would lose her sense of who she was if she became too fluent in that foreign tongue.

At Loomstown, the standard of their English had constantly worried some individual award winners. While it has been claimed that the academy should not insist on privileging Standard English forms in academic work (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974; Milroy, 1999), this seems too extreme a view. Although it is accepted that other language varieties are capable of expressing sophisticated abstract ideas (Labov, 1973), it is also acknowledged that particular communities invariably adopt their own distinctive language practices and consider them to be signs of membership of those communities. There is no reason why the academic community should not do the same (Smith, 2012). However, people's ability to tackle degree level work should not be misrecognised prematurely when they simply need more time to internalise the academy's distinctive language variety (Lillis, 2003).

Research into the assumptions, attitudes and practices of university admissions tutors selecting students for art and design degree courses revealed some serious injustices in assessing potential students. In an art and design department where applicants far outnumbered the places available, the student's portfolio played a central part in the admissions process, even though little guidance was given about what it should contain. Decisions about which work portfolios showed promise related to particular kinds of cultural capital and reflected white, middle class and male dispositions. Those chosen were favoured at the expense of misrecognising the work of candidates from a different class, gender or race (Burke and McManus, 2009).

The foregoing cases (Lillis, 2003; Burke and McManus, 2009) are evidence that there are formidable obstacles, less visible or obvious than some others (such as distance of a university from home or the time needed to travel there) relating to class, gender and race facing some students and leading to misrecognition of their ability to benefit from higher education because insufficient account is taken of the increased cultural, linguistic and

social variety among applicants in a mass system of higher education. Misrecognition should be included in any account of barriers to participation by non-traditional learners. It characterises a predisposition to undervalue a candidate's intellectual ability or likelihood to succeed because of her unfamiliarity with middle class culture or the subtlety, nuances and complexities of academic literacy (Burke, 2012). Familiarity does not indicate innate ability, but has been acquired in educational environments from which minority social group members are often excluded. Ideally, according to the democratic argument, those who have been excluded from the literacy and the academic practices and processes that distinguish the academic community should nevertheless have their ability to benefit from the more prestigious degree courses recognised. They could then be admitted by the high prestige universities and immersed in the literacy and academic practices and gradually make them their own. University admissions practices would improve if their processes and the reasons for decisions about candidates' acceptance or refusal were more carefully and openly explained and shown to be demonstrably fair and free from cultural bias.

Misrecognition means applicants from underrepresented groups are in danger of being rejected for the wrong reasons (Burke and McManus, 2009). The hegemonic discourse that positions working class students as 'out of place' in high status universities is so powerful that the students themselves will internalise that perspective and deliberately refuse offers from them, preferring less prestigious post-1992 universities, expecting to feel more at home, enjoy a stronger sense of community and be freed from a much greater fear of failure and any sense of being in the wrong place (Reay et al., 2001). There are implications in these findings for this research, which sought to discover whether a particular group of non-traditional adult learners could return to education successfully. The answer may well be, 'Yes, they can,' but their success could be limited. Their domestic situations and their level three Access qualifications make it likely they will attend a neighbourhood, post 1992 university of relatively low status because of its low

position in the university league tables. While the degrees the students take do have value and will probably have been chosen because they will qualify applicants for their chosen career, the degrees are unlikely to open the door to the most prestigious and highly paid occupations. In opting for a working class ethos at Loomstown, the teachers seemed to have accepted that most students wanting to go to university would choose a post 1992 institution.

With situations such as these in mind, it is argued that the notions of *recognition* and *misrecognition*, are closely related to the concept of *redistribution*, the more equitable distribution of opportunities in education and in society generally. Both are concerned with achieving justice. *Recognition* demands adequate regard and the mutual acceptance of one another as equal and independent, irrespective of differences in background or experience, enabling everyone to achieve subjectivity, agency and personhood. To withhold recognition is unjust. It impedes equal participation in social life or in higher education. Recognition must inevitably involve redistribution of educational resources (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

THREE FORMS OF CAPITAL

The research seeks to identify the benefits gained and losses accrued by adults returning to education and the reasons for what might be termed the successes and failures. It accepts that whether particular outcomes are seen as benefits or not may differ depending on what the students, their close relatives, the learning centre or central government are seeking from the return (Schuller, 2004). The framework for analysis is constructed by the three capitals triangle: human capital, social capital and identity capital which has been adopted from Figure 3.1a (Schuller, 2004), the model which forms the base on which the research builds. It identifies the forms of capital an individual will need to complete a successful learning journey in adult education. The capitals focus on the changes to the learner's

identity or identities; the identifiable returns, gains and losses as a result of her investment in her return to education; the identifiable returns for the community and its members from its investment in her resumed education. This focus on the individual and the community is central. The effect of education on a student is very important, but so too is the effect on the community. Ideally the community invests in the individual, who does not live and work in isolation, but brings benefits back to the community through supporting herself and her dependents by selling her skills, knowledge and experience in paid work and making contributions from her income to the national exchequer and its investments. Later in the thesis (chapter 6), the model will be used to identify the way in which capitals are applied and generated to produce benefits or misapplied or not applied, bringing losses.

Utilising the three capitals proposed by Schuller (2004) to investigate the benefits and losses experienced by the award winners as a result of their return to learning brings three specific and important possible effects of learning into focus. The first is its influence on *identity capital*, ‘the characteristics of the individual that define his or her outlook or self-image’ (Schuller, 2004, p. 20, Coté, 2005). The second is *human capital*, learning’s effect on the, ‘knowledge and skills that enable individuals to function effectively in economic and social life’ (Schuller, 2004, p. 14, Schultz, 1961). The last is *social capital*, learning’s influence on an individual’s networks and norms arising from the relationships that enable them to achieve common goals more effectively together than alone (Schuller, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Together, the capitals cover what could be considered the most important effects of an investment in learning.

The wider benefits of learning represented in Figure 3.1a are positioned in relation to the form of capital in which they have most worth. However, quite often a benefit will generate two or even three forms of capital. The positioning of the benefits within the Figure 3.1a triangle is intended to recognise a benefit may not constitute one form of

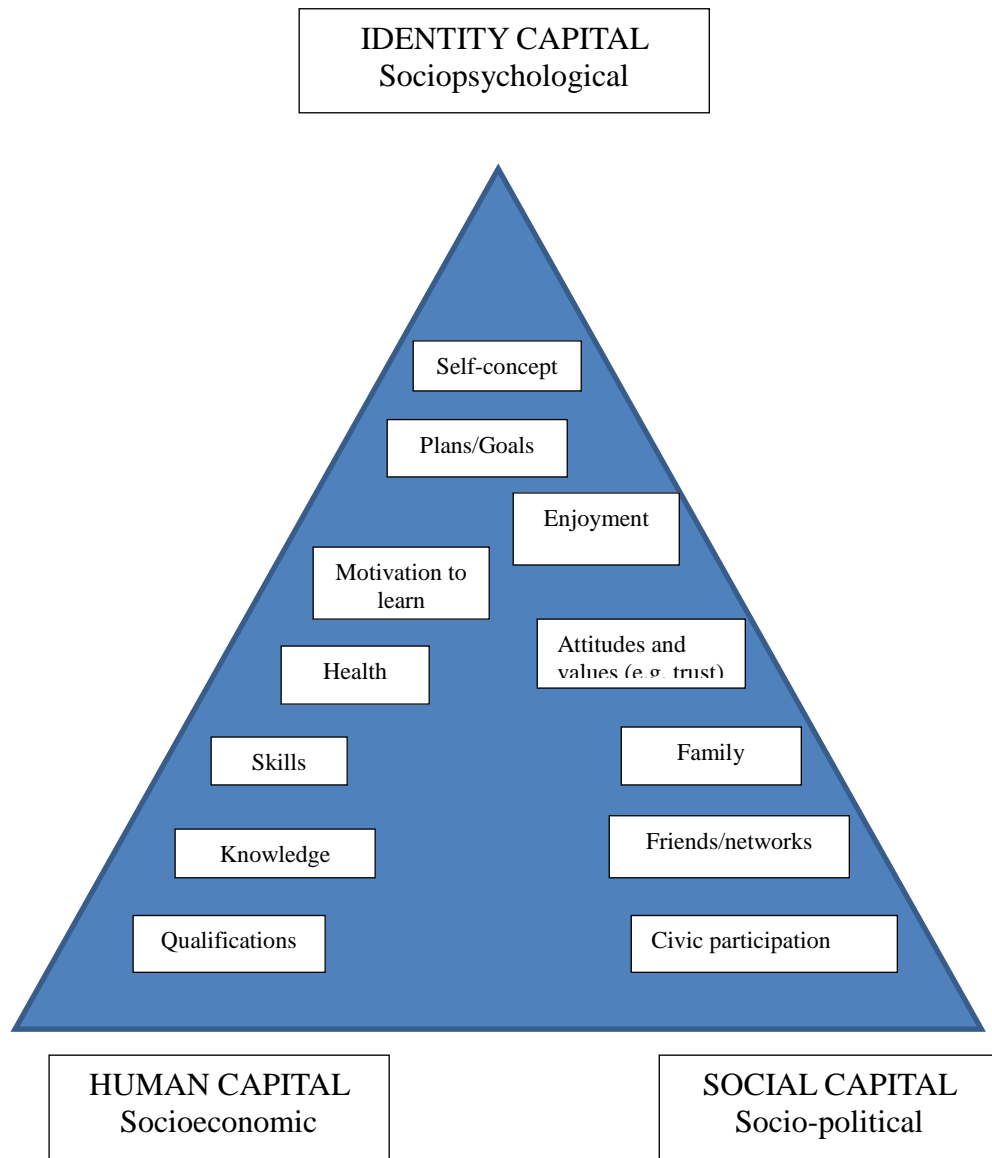


Figure 3.1a: Conceptualisation of the wider benefits of learning (Source: Schuller et al., 2004, pp. 13 & 21).

capital alone. Additionally, the positioning of the benefits gives some indication of their interrelatedness with one another. Thus knowledge, skills and qualifications are closely related, as are the social networks of friends and family and civic participation.

The three capitals model provided a framework for analysing the effects of the students' lived experience of their learning to foreground important individual and social gains, contributions made and losses incurred. However, the model confines itself to specific

aims, to devising methods for identifying the contribution of learning to important social goals other than the acquisition of qualifications that might also be important outcomes of adult learning. It is concerned with possible economic benefits, including the benefits to the wider society. It also accepts that to return to learning is to take risks. Positive outcomes are not guaranteed. People may fail courses, lose confidence or find their family relationships damaged or broken. Outcomes may be mixed, such as when the personal cost of success proves too great for some individuals. Furthermore, it is recognised that it is not always clear if a particular outcome is a benefit or a loss. The end of a relationship, for example, may be seen as a beneficial release by one partner and a damaging loss by the other. A further problem arises in determining the extent to which learning, rather than some other factor, such as family support or increased opportunity, is to be credited with creating a positive outcome. Sometimes the combined influence of all of them will play a part.

The model does not include issues of power and inequality arising from education. One person's educational gain may incur another person's loss. The more people who gain degrees, the greater is the loss for those without one. The model does not make allowances for the unequal distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000) or the unequal access to education that ensues from it. It does not enter the debates over the tension between voluntary services and the responsibilities of the state to provide those services. However, the model is presented as a starting point. Schuller invites other researchers to develop and modify the model as they see fit in the course of their own work. It has been possible to analyse some of the issues not covered by the three capitals model in the closer examination of students' educational biographies.

Identity capital

Identity capital relates to how a person makes decisions outside the economic sphere and

the workplace to decide the kind of person she aspires to be: her beliefs and values, her membership of particular groups, her leisure pursuits, her intellectual and aesthetic interests. It is embedded in sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive, enabling the individual to invest in one or more particular identities and acquired largely in socialising settings such as the family and education (Lewis, 2016).

Human capital

Human capital comprises the knowledge and skills acquired and possessed by individuals enabling them to function effectively both economically by obtaining employment and socially by contributing to society (Schuller, 2004). Its underlying premise is that investment in education will produce returns just as investment in physical capital does, including physical health.

Social capital

Social capital refers to relationships, 'the networks and norms which enable people to contribute effectively to common goals' (Schuller, 2004, p. 17): the "networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 1996: p. 56). It is not a quality or attribute of an individual, but a public good from which all members of a group can benefit whether they helped to create it or not (Coleman, 1988-89; Field, 2005). It can enable people to perform notably better than might have been expected in some situations. For example, groups of children in faith schools have been found to outperform expectations in public examinations because of the advantages they have acquired from the social capital accumulated from the shared supportive ethos of school, home and faith (Coleman, 1998-9).

The thesis builds on Schuller's model in arguing and presenting evidence to justify the claim that social capital is the most important of the capitals in ensuring participants are able to reach their ultimate aim of finding appropriate employment.

Cultural capital does not appear in this model, which requires some explanation. The concept is used to explain how the social order is reproduced (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Those with the most cultural assets ensure the assets are passed on to their children to enable them to maintain their privileged position among the elite. It has already been seen how a lack of cultural capital can easily be misrepresented to signify unsuitability for entry into certain institutions and courses for those whose class, gender or ethnicity have given them few opportunities to acquire it. However, it is not included among the capitals invoked by Schuller (2004) as most significant in ensuring that the benefits of education are acquired and enjoyed. Schuller himself acknowledges, but rejects, the claim of critics that there is no need for the concept of social capital because cultural capital covers much the same ground. He believes it is legitimate to use the concept to refer to both values and behaviour, and to view it as a means of achieving, and a characteristic of, a healthier, happier, wealthier society. Schuller is convinced that it represents more effectively than cultural capital a complementary rôle to human capital by balancing the importance of the individual's rôle in education with that played by the community, social relationships and networks. The social capital concept subsumes cultural capital and complements human capital more effectively.

Schuller contends the three capitals are relevant across the whole spectrum of adult education, formal and informal, ranging from universities and higher learning to small informal groups pursuing common interests, such as book clubs, embroidery groups, and choral and instrumental music makers. Identity capital, human capital and social capital are able to cover all the benefits that can accrue from this wide range of learning pursuits.

Although not mentioned in Schuller's exposition, the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1993) plays a part in the shaping of outcomes. Not easily or consistently defined, it can be a disposition or a set of socialised dispositions (Burke, 2012; Bourdieu, 1993). It makes people who they are and determines the places where they 'know the rules and feel at home' or feel 'like fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). It determines whether or not they will feel comfortable in particular situations, but distinctly uncomfortable in others:

[A]djusted to particular conditions in which it is constituted, the *habitus* engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 95).

Bourdieu's concept of *field* is also helpful. Each *field* in society's 'social room' has its own rules of access, preferences, actions and practices (Engleby, 2015). People know the rules of some social groups and feel comfortable in joining them, but are ill at ease in others, depending on how they have been shaped by their life experiences: 'The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63). Social groups are sites of struggle. The exercise of power and its outcomes will decide a person's social position within a particular group and her access to the various forms of *capital* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 85).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the model of barriers in adult education in all three of its forms (Bariso, 1986). Although some limitations were identified in the barriers metaphor, it was judged to be robust enough to be applied in the research. It is recognised that some barriers can manifest themselves in more than one form. However, this need not be a weakness in

the model. Recognising when and why this occurs can deepen understanding of the strength of the barriers' resistance to demolition. The analysis of the concept of barriers has been carried out to gain an understanding of the obstacles that might confront a working class adult woman returning to education and how they might be negotiated. It has become clearer during the literature review that to admit non-traditional students to higher education requires a review of practices at all levels of adult education, and this is recognised to be happening. Further education institutions are likely to find their ethos, curriculum and style of delivery needs to be rethought. Some of the courses provided to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills so far do not seem ideally suited to their purpose. The basic skills courses have not been successful in meeting their aims and would benefit from revision. Some ways of delivering the curriculum have been found more successful than others, notably to single gender groups. Further research into this would be valuable.

The different ways in which Access and widening participation are understood within the competing meritocratic and democratic discourses was scrutinised, as was the tendency of the meritocratic discourse to position underrepresented groups within deficit discourses, particularly in higher education. The danger in the polarisation of the two discourses is that the discussion may become too abstract and lose sight of the practical issues of how change might be brought about. An important purpose of the thesis is to discover how actual non-traditional adult students dealt with the difficulties in realising their ambitions of successfully entering higher education.

An analysis of misrecognition in higher education of under-represented groups such as women, less prosperous socioeconomic classes and minority ethnic groups drew on the concepts of barriers and the meritocratic discourse to explain the tendency to exclude those who do not conform to an image of the ideal student constructed mainly by a white, middle

class male discourse. The concept of *misrecognition* was introduced in the hope that it would shed more light on the research participants' experiences.

Finally, the three capitals model (Schuller, 2004) was investigated. It identifies the qualities, achievements and relationships to be nurtured to ensure those aspiring to be students and those who are students already accumulate and invest the forms of capital needed to negotiate successfully the barriers they face as non-traditional adult learners. It was recognised that the divisions between the capitals are not absolute, but this was not considered a feature that prevented effective application. Rather, it was viewed as an example of how different forms of capital can be accrued simultaneously. How this happens was deemed worthy of further investigation. It was argued that the characteristics and achievements represented by the concept of cultural capital can be represented equally well by a combination of identity, human and social capital. The model would be used to deepen understanding of the participants' experiences.

Chapter four focuses on method and methodology and justifies the choice of the research strategy. It examines the two other approaches in addition to Schuller's Three Capitals used to analyse and interpret the data and their appropriateness for the task. Because most of the data is drawn from interviews, it examines the appropriateness of interviews for gathering research data and some of the dangers to be noted and avoided. The chapter concluded with an account of the close attention given to ethical issues.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter the method (the practices carried out in the research) and the methodology (the general principles or axioms underpinning the research) are explained. Close attention is given to evaluating the appropriateness and validity of both the method and the methodology. This is a piece of qualitative, interpretative research, underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology.

The research draws on two approaches to the generation, analysis and interpretation of the data. The first uses auto/biographical narrative to gather the students' accounts of their lived experiences. The second, the theme analysis approach, is studied closely in the chapter and applied to highlight the outcomes of the experience shared by all or most of the students and regarded as most important by them. This chapter explains why the approaches were chosen, their limitations, and the decisions made about how they were to be used.

Interviews provided most of the data in the research, so there is an analysis of interviews: their potential strengths and weaknesses; the pitfalls to avoid and the good practice to be followed. My position as both interviewer and researcher needed careful consideration. Consequently, the chapter includes a critical review of my rôle as researcher and the influence of insider/outsider issues. It identifies the problems those positions might cause in encouraging faulty judgements or a misreading of situations through confusing them with personal experiences. Finally, there is a discussion of the ethical issues faced in research projects of this kind and a particular focus on the specific ethical problems

encountered in this research and an explanation of how ethical principles were applied to resolve them.

KEY CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

Method refers to the range of approaches – the tools, processes and ways used to gather data from which the inferences, interpretations, explanations and predictions are to be made within a particular educational research study, which may include interviews, narratives and documentary analysis (McGregor and Murnane, 2010).

Methodology refers to the general principles or axioms and the paradigmatic assumptions associated with the research. It is the process of justifying the chosen method or methods, interrogating them and the decisions made by the researcher about them and the modifications made to them to ensure they are as fit for their purpose as possible (McGregor and Murnane, 2010).

Interpretivism believes direct knowledge of the world is not possible. It can only be reached through the world view of an individual. Interpretivism recognises no absolutes because all phenomena can be attributed meaning or interpreted in different ways by different people at different times in different ways: ‘knowledge is constituted through lived experience of reality’ (Sandberg, 2005, p. 44). The research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm or world view (Burgess et al., 2006).

The intention was to undertake **interpretative research**. In doing this, the first aim was to reliably capture and represent the students’ experiences and apply the three forms of capital within a framework designed by Schuller (2004) to interpret and understand those experiences. The second aim was to use the auto/biographical approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009) to increase my awareness of the influence of my

own life experiences on the choice of research topic and the direction the research took. The third aim was to interpret the students' experiences faithfully using theme analysis of the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The research was carried out underpinned by the belief that authentic knowledge can be found in an analysis of an individual's reflection on her life experiences and the meanings she attaches to them (Sandberg, 2005; Merrill, 2012). The intention was to ensure the data generated sufficient reliable material to answer the research questions about benefits and losses and the implications for future practice.

Ontology is the study of being and reality (Burgess et al., 2006). As has been implied, the ontological view of the interpretivist is that being or reality is subjectively constructed and does not exist independently of the mind. **Epistemology** is the study of knowledge. The epistemological view of the interpretivist is that knowledge is acquired through understanding the subjective constructions of reality and the meanings assigned to them by those being researched (Mack, 2010). It is not the hard, secure, objective knowledge of reality that the positivists seek. More importantly for the researcher, it is the justification for being able to make claims about the social phenomenon being studied or researched, in this case, the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the participants' accounts of their experiences.

Montage is one of several metaphors and images intended to illuminate aspects of the methods of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). It is a composite picture made by combining several, separate pictures, searching for similarities, associations and connections that are plausible and credible (Merriam-Webster, 2013), which seemed particularly appropriate to this research, particularly in the way it draws on theme analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Images are juxtaposed and overlay or overlay other images, creating something new in which all the images influence and define one another (Denzin

and Lincoln, 2005). Identifying common themes in students' accounts created a new picture with new associations and connections between accounts, producing something more than could have been created by viewing all of them singly.

Validity in this context means *truth*: 'the extent to which an account accurately represents the phenomena to which it refers' (Hammersley, 2007, p. 192). As the researcher, I wanted to establish the truthfulness of the data and the validity of the research. While this seems straightforward, Hammersley acknowledges that many qualitative researchers believe it has no place in their work. 'Validity' is a contested term, understood differently by quantitative and qualitative researchers; among qualitative researchers; and between biographical researchers (Merrill and West, 2009). However, it is essential for the qualitative researcher to aim for **authenticity** ensuring any theory that is constructed resembles reality because it has emerged from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 2015), and represents faithfully the participants' experiences (Edmunds and Scudder, 2009) and their understanding of their world (Seale, 1999).

The essence of interpretivism is that it is:

defined or constituted in terms of human beings attributing meaning to, or interpreting, phenomena under investigation. The rôle of communication, symbols and language is fundamental to social life from an interpretivist's point of view (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 55).

The questions the interpretivist must answer satisfactorily are: can he or she be sure a person has been honest and truthful in revealing his or her construction of the world and life experiences? Can he or she be sure the researcher has generally understood and faithfully represented those experiences? The goal was to establish research validity

against the criteria of plausibility, the likelihood of the truth of an account in the light of what was known of the situation; its credibility: the presence or absence of the ring of truth (Hammersley, 2003). I wanted to test the truth of the research, taking into account the nature of what was being researched; the circumstances in which the research was conducted; any of my personal qualities that might call the research findings into question; whether or not the findings were likely to be generally accepted as true by the research community (Hammersley, 2003). This degree of rigour was particularly important ethically as I would be making practical recommendations based on the research.

Qualitative research is, ‘a situated activity (located in) the real world’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Things do not always go according to plan and there is a constant potential for disorder, disruption, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Some people who could make a significant contribution to a research may not be available. Particular texts that could prove helpful might be lost or unobtainable, so the researcher’s intentions have to be adjusted or modified. This was the case with this research. Two of the individual award winners could not be interviewed. One had left the area and could not be contacted. Another was too unwell to be interviewed. Coincidentally, two group award winners were also unavailable because the whereabouts of one was unknown and the other was seriously ill. There appeared to be no policy documents for Moorsmills College or the Loomstown Community Learning Centre relating to the basic skills initiative. Staff members searched for them, but did not find them.

PARTICULAR APPROACHES TO THE RESEARCH

The auto/biographical narrative approach

Merrill and West pose important questions that the researcher must ask himself about his own lived experiences and how they influenced the stories he generated of the researched subjects:

We cannot write stories about ourselves without making reference to and hence constructing others' lives and selves, and those constructions we make of others in writing their life histories contain and reflect our own histories and social and cultural locations, as well as psychologies. (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 31)

I recognised the importance of interrogating what in my own lived experiences had brought me to this research and how that might have influenced its shape, outcomes and conclusions. I recognised that I came to this research with a pre-existing interest in the subject. I shared some of the participants' negative experiences of compulsory education, but had been able through good fortune to successfully continue my education as an adult.

I and my sister were the children of a working class, single mother, brought up as lodgers in one room for the first ten years of my life and then on a council estate. My mother had been raised in rural Ireland and had left school and home at 14 to begin work as a maid in Dublin. She eventually made her way to England and, widowed at the age of 27 with two children under three, she had begun work washing up in a school kitchen. Eleven years later, after studying City and Guilds vocational courses at night school, she became the head caterer in a large secondary school and some years after that became a senior technician in the Department of Hotel and Catering at the University of Surrey. In my early years, we were very poor. My mother believed education was the route out of poverty and was determined her children should succeed at school. I saw some parallels between her and the award winners. They had some similar experiences and knew what it was to be marginalised by others because of their situation. She was driven, first, by her desire to achieve respectability, identified as an aspiration of many working class women (Skeggs, 1997a), and secondly, by her burning desire that her children should achieve

academic success.

While my social background was similar to that of the research participants, I had moved away from mine, while they had remained in theirs. My relationship with my mother played a major part in how my school career, subsequent academic and teaching career developed. I recognise that in continuing my academic study throughout my life, I was trying to satisfy her that I was achieving my potential as a learner. She wanted perfection, which I could not achieve, and this caused problems for us both, which were still unresolved at the time of her death and, for me, continue still. Although I was not fully aware of it during the research, I now believe it played a large part in my interest in both the students' relationships with their parents and their parents' influence on their educational experiences.

From the age of 18, I spent five years studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Among my fellow students were several who had left school at fifteen and followed various careers, some of them unskilled, and come to their religious vocation in their thirties, forties and fifties. Among them were some highly intelligent and self-educated men. Had they had the opportunity when they were younger, they could have entered higher education. I realised they represented many other intellectually gifted people in the population, who had never had the opportunity to develop their intellectual gifts, usually because their families could not afford to allow them to stay in education. It taught me the importance of making second chance education available to those who wanted and could benefit from it.

Later in my own life, I taught English for thirty two years to many working class students, male and female, in an eleven to eighteen comprehensive school. It was one of my own passions that those who could should go on to higher education. A good number went on

to read English, some at Oxbridge or Russell group universities. However, a few who entered the newer universities would drop out within the first twelve months. It was always a great disappointment to me that, having reached so far, they did not continue. Furthermore, there were several, mainly girls, who, although academically able, came nowhere close to reaching their educational potential while at school. Several girls left at sixteen and slipped quickly into what seemed to be a limbo of single parenthood. At Loomstown, it was as if I were meeting some of these women for a second time, but on this occasion their frame of mind had completely changed and they were seeking a more positive encounter with education. Like the research subjects, most came from the poorer social classes. This made me particularly interested in what the research subjects' return to education meant to them. At the same time, I did my best to ensure that my own perspective, which sought positive outcomes from a return to education, did not unduly influence the direction of the research or its findings.

The autobiographical narrative method (Merrill and West, 2009) also influenced the focus of the interviews I conducted with the award winners, as my questions (Appendix One) were intended to learn how the winners saw their return to learning in the context of the rest of their lives. At the same time, the method enabled me to be aware of the influence of my own lived experiences on the way I represented the lived experiences of the seven students and how I understood them. It enabled me to understand why I had chosen this particular topic to investigate. While it enabled me to recognise certain patterns, similarities and differences in the interviewees' perceptions of experiences in their lives, it also foregrounded the uniqueness of interviewees' experiences and insights. It helped me to understand the students' educational and personal histories and construct them in a coherent, albeit provisional form. Finally, the method gave me a better understanding of the importance of educational journeys, the various forms they could take and the things

most likely to influence them. It provided an opportunity to present the biographies in a way that might resonate with others involved in this field and perhaps help them to reflect on and better understand their own experiences (Plowright, 2007).

Concerning the validity of auto/biographical research, Merrill and West occupy a critical realist position and make modest claims, since they argue:

Validity, from this perspective, partly derives from generating some account of the past, of what it was like from the inside, but this can only be done in conditional ways. The past is always a provisional construct, mediated through the present, including the workings of language and relationship. (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 163)

Finally, the writers recognise that interviews are always relational and dynamic.

Researchers come to their research with their own particular interests and concerns, which may generate different, but equally valuable, accounts of what people's lives have meant for them: 'Variety is not the antithesis of validity' (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 164).

The interviewer and researcher bring particular experiences and interests, which may help them to construct new and valid insights and interpretations of the experience of those being interviewed

Theme analysis

Initially, I formulated my main theme, *the benefits and losses of learning*, and I scrutinised the literature to identify and categorise what the benefits and losses might be. They could be understood as gains and losses of capital in three different forms: *identity capital*, *human capital* and *social capital* (Schuller, 2004). This would become an important

component of the emergent conceptual model, BLARE (**B**enefits and **L**osses for **A**dult **R**eturners to **E**ducation), used later to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. However, theme analysis itself must be centred on participants' experiences and how they interpreted and understood them (Braun and Clark, 2006), so I made myself thoroughly familiar with the transcripts of the interviews with the participants, sought for patterns of benefits and loss and the most important recurring features. I drew them together into common themes: varying experiences of benefit or loss, which could be separated into seven sub-themes relating to different aspects of a learners' experience including hopes and ambitions; self-perception and social relationships; employment status and income; a learner identity and learning; community involvement; level of confidence; management of health and well-being; level of achievement; family life. The seven themes, each open to analysis of benefit and loss, would dictate the research questions I would formulate.

While it is common to refer to themes as emerging from the data, it would be more accurate to say that they are to be found in the researcher's mind, not in the data themselves, and are created by the researcher during deep consideration of, and the search for, links within the data (Braun and Clark, 2006). Although I came to the data with ideas about what the benefits and losses experienced by adults returning to education might be, I endeavoured to put my preconceptions aside and focus on the students' definitions and experiences of benefit and loss.

Generalisability

Denzin's view is that generalisability is not possible in interpretive research:

The interpretivist rejects generalisation as a goal and never aims to draw

randomly selected samples of human experience. ... every instance of human activity, if thickly described ... represents a slice from the life world that is the proper subject matter for interpretive enquiry ... every topic must be seen as carrying its own logic, sense of order, structure and meaning (Denzin, 1983: pp. 133-134).

However, although statistical generalisability is not possible from a small qualitative research, it does seem possible for a researcher to make theoretical or ‘fuzzy’ generalisations that might resonate with other researchers in this field (Green, 1999; Bassey, 1999). While the research is unique, other researchers might recognise patterns similar to patterns present in their own findings. Consequently, it would seem possible to suggest principles and make some practical recommendations based on the similarities. Notwithstanding, the research aims to draw on its interview data to reveal, ‘thickly described accounts that enable the reader to empathetically understand the lived reality of research participants.’ (Savage, 2015, p. 222). Furthermore, as a narrative study, it is hoped that the accounts of the students’ lives will be read ... ‘for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

INTERVIEWS

I chose interviews to gather my data as I wanted to have first-hand accounts of the participants’ educational experiences and interviews were the best way of obtaining them. I wanted to find out from the participants whether my understanding from my reading and own experience were in harmony with theirs or whether I needed to revise my view about their experiences.

An interview is a social situation in which two persons (or more) typically unfamiliar with each other converse for a short period of time, on average around two or three hours (Alvesson, 2002, p. 114). It is co-constructed, each participant taking cues from the other about what can and cannot be said (Mann, 2010). Ideally the interviewer, while concerned to elicit as much about the interviewee as possible, tries to influence the content and manner of the interviewee's responses as little as possible, although he will encourage the development of pertinent topics, while showing no interest in others. Analysis and interpretation of the interviews requires sensitivity to why the interviewer and interviewee reacted in particular ways.

The research data have been gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by *weak focus* or *weak frame*. *Weak focus* denotes restricted control over an interview's timing, duration and content (Scott and Usher, 1999). The interviews conducted in this research might be more accurately described as having had a *flexible focus* and a *flexible frame*, as the interviewer strove to adapt to the direction taken by the participants in the most productive way. All the interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, as had been intended. There were several set questions, but a flexibility to follow seemingly rich and potentially fruitful topics introduced by the interviewees before returning to the core questions.

A *weak frame* indicates insufficient attention given both to the way in which questions are asked, answers received, perceived and interpreted and to paralinguistic features related to dress, age, gender, intonation, the nature of the relationship, the seating and setting. Where influence in the interviews has been recognised or suspected, I have made reference to it. An example would be my later anxiety that my choice of dress (sports jacket, shirt and tie) had initially made the interviews seem too formal, as the participants had all dressed very

informally indeed in tracksuits, jeans, tee shirts, tank tops and trainers.

It is important to create a good relationship between the researcher and the researched and to be aware of the influence of the relationship on the research itself. Some research programmes involve several interviews to give time to strengthen the relationships and gain deeper insight. In this research, participants were initially interviewed only for an hour to an hour and a half, although there were several much shorter, less structured conversations face to face, by email or social media subsequently over a period of three years. Had time and circumstances permitted, the data would have been enriched by a greater number of longer interviews.

The physical and social contextual choices relating to interviews require careful consideration. The physical setting should signal the event has clear goals. There should be awareness of how social categories, such as gender, class and age, and the interviewees' perception of the interviewer's rôle, can influence the process (Podesva, 2012). The interviews with the award winners and teachers took place in various venues. Three were conducted in my house, one at a group winner's home and the rest at the Loomstown Learning Centre in an office or classroom. The venues away from the centre were used because they were the only places available at the time for interviews that would have been difficult to rearrange. The venues other than the learning centre were not ideal, because they were not neutral settings. One of the participants would be on, 'home ground,' while the other would not. Although it is difficult to assess any negative effect, it appeared that, once people had settled in their interview, they were comfortable with one another and not obviously affected by their surroundings. All but one of the interviews took place with participants sitting round a table. This could have created too formal an atmosphere, although the participants appeared to become relaxed after a few minutes.

Looking back, I was unsure why I had chosen a context and mode of dress likely to make the relationship too formal. At the time, I believed it would help to establish the seriousness of the enterprise, while I was confident the interviewees would soon relax. I was reluctant to present myself too informally, as I would not feel comfortable doing that. Later, I realised my motives might have been more complex. I have already noted that when I met the women in the research, it was like meeting some of my own pupils for a second time, particularly those who had left school with few or no qualifications when they could have done much better. On reflection, I realised that in my teaching career, I had positioned some working class pupils within deficit discourses and often without realising it cast myself as rescuing them from the unfulfilling lives I believed might lie in store for them. With these pupils I had clearly failed to achieve my aspirations. It seemed possible that, in interviewing adults with similar backgrounds, I was unintentionally resuming my own story and hoping for a happier ending for the adult participants in the retelling. In opting for the formal setting and formal dress, I was slipping back into my teacher rôle and treating them as if we were continuing a story in which we had all been involved and perhaps misunderstood and were being given the opportunity to repair the damage and bring the story to a more satisfactory conclusion. This may have predisposed me to give greater prominence to the positive than the negative and, if the interviewees had sensed my anxiety, encouraged them to shape their stories in an optimistic way.

All the student interviews included ten questions relating to the interviewee's life story (See Appendix One), giving particular emphasis to their educational history from childhood to the time of the interview, including the influence of their birth family, extended family and conjugal family or families. They also included exchanges in which interviewer and interviewee talked about the interviewee's experiences and were able to check with one another they were in agreement about what had been said (Sandberg,

2005).

Table 4.1 identifies the participants interviewed as part of the research: four individual winners of the Adult Student of the Year award; three members of the group that won a special award in 2009; four teachers praised by award winners as particularly supportive and interviewed to give a deeper understanding of the ethos of the learning centre. The group award nominee was Terry, the partner of Kate. He accompanied her as her chaperone, but serendipitously made an important contribution and agreed it could be included in the data. Like all those interviewed, he went through the procedures ensuring he gave fully informed consent to his involvement.

Table 4.1: The participants interviewed in the research.

Participants	Number	Notes
Individual Adult Student of the Year Award Winners: Emma, Clare, Kate, Melanie.	4	Chosen for their commitment to learning, support for others and for having a clear aim in their studies.
Group Award Winners: Marjorie, Violet, Shirley	3	Members of the MAVIS group teaching economic and healthy cooking in their community.
Group Award Nominee: Terry.	1	Partner of one of the Award Winners, Kate, and nominated with her for a group award in 2009.
Teachers: Judith, Anne, Emily, Moira.	4	Named by one or more winners as particularly influential on their learning experience.
Total	12	

Students were free to choose their own pseudonyms. One colleague was surprised participants had been free to partially shape their identity in this way. Another claimed all the students had chosen middle class forenames, and, as the research was in part an investigation of changed identities, these encoded examples of aspirational identity should

be noted. Others with whom this was discussed were unconvinced.

However, as Hall (1995) indicates, our identity is conferred on us by others:

Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside. They are the way in which we are recognised and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us.

Without the others there is no self. There is no self-recognition (Hall, 1995, p. 8).

It seems at least possible that choosing names perceived as middle class represented a move by participants to influence the way other people saw them and conferred their identity on them.

Insider/Outsider Issues

There were senses in which I was both an insider and an outsider researcher in this research, although I believe the outsider identity was stronger. At its most straightforward, insider research is the study of the group to which one belongs and of which one has considerable prior knowledge (Naples, 2006; Loxley and Seery, 2008), although the latter would not necessarily require actual membership of the group (Merton, 1972). The division between an insider and an outsider researcher might not be clear-cut or constant, as some identities will confer insider status and some exclude it (Banks, 1998). Both positions have advantages and disadvantages (Greene, 2014). In one very practical sense, I was an insider. Because I was a member of the Loomstown Rotary Club sponsoring the awards, the teachers were very willing to talk to me and to encourage award winners to do the same. Nevertheless, although I had been a teacher for many years, I had worked in

secondary and higher education. I was an outsider, who had never taught in further education and had never known any of the adult award winners or been inside the learning centre before the research began. Furthermore, I was a man interviewing women, so had to be sure I had understood as well as I could what was being shared with me.

Any outside researcher's attempt to represent another person's perceptions and experiences is seen by some as disempowering, disrespectful and not to be attempted (Bridges, 2001). Yet, while there are limitations in the understanding an outsider can develop of an insider's experience, an understanding is possible and has value, depending on the researcher's empathy and imagination, integrity, honesty, respect for the participants and willingness to examine rigorously his interpretation and submit it to the judgement of peers. I did my best to ensure all participants were willing to share their understanding of their learning experience and its outcomes. .

There were advantages to being neither a member of the Loomstown learning community nor a person with experience of further education. I came to the research without preconceived ideas about the centre or further education. I had to read widely and listen carefully to learn about the centre's life and the pre-occupations and the priorities of further education. I had to win the women's acceptance and convince them it would be worthwhile and safe sharing their stories and entrusting them to me. My initial distance from the group and its members may have helped me to see the broader picture and to identify elements they were too closely involved to see (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

Knowing none of the women students before our interviews, I had no preconceptions about them or their stories. I had met two of the teachers during the course of my Rotary work, but did not know either of them, well. A third teacher lives in the same cul-de-sac and is married to a fellow Rotarian. We know one another, but not well.

I wanted to discover what the students had gained or lost from their lived experience of the learning community. It was important to get to know something about their earlier lives and the things that they valued. I believe that the richness of the data they shared with me demonstrates that, whatever misjudgements and mistakes I might have made, the students were very open and honest in our discussions.

As a middleclass male, significantly older (twenty years or more) than the working class female students interviewed, I realised there were potential barriers to be negotiated. The interviewees may have seen me as a person with power, particularly as they had been asked to see me by the head of centre. They may have been anxious to please me as an associate of the centre head and may have wanted to give a good impression of the centre, to which the individual award winners certainly felt a loyalty. They would have responded differently to a female researcher and may have felt she would have more understanding of their lives and problems. However, when I analysed the transcripts later, I believed there was sufficient evidence that the interviewees had been as open and honest as possible and I had sufficient material to approach the research questions relating to benefits, losses and principles governing practice. I had worked as a qualified relationship counsellor for thirty five years, which helped me to establish a relationship of trust. I was able to share carefully judged and appropriate self-disclosure (Hanson, 2005), which helped to establish some common ground, although not always experienced from the same standpoint. Some school situations I had experienced as a teacher and they had experienced as pupils. I explained what in my background stimulated my interest in them as non-traditional adult learners. In some interviews, I was able to share similar experiences of family life as a child; similar feelings of being an outsider in compulsory education; and similar pleasure in learning in later life. This helped me to move into the 'space between' being an insider and an outsider (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), where the common ground created a relationship in which the interviewees would feel comfortable enough to be open and

honest in their reflections on their experiences.

The senses in which I considered myself an insider were not always necessarily helpful. Sometimes I had to exercise caution by not being too quick to see similarities. I had to keep reminding myself that my focus was on the students' interests and concerns, and not on possible parallels between their situations and mine.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The researcher has an ethical responsibility to the learning community to ensure the findings of a particular research are accurate and honest, particularly when recommendations for policy and practice based on those findings are being made. If the recommendations are implemented, there will be a financial cost and practical consequences for the teachers and students affected by the changes. The researcher must be conscious of his or her responsibility to the wider community funding the projects and to the teachers and students whose practices could be modified (Hammersley, 2003).

A researcher must do everything to ensure the consent of participants is genuinely informed. At the beginning of all interviews, I was meticulous in ensuring the interviewees were made fully aware of my purpose in conducting the research and the part they were being asked to play. I explained as fully as I could that they had full control of the content of their contribution to the interviews. They had the right to read the interview transcript and to decide whether or not they would agree to it being used. They could ask for any part to be removed if they did not believe it accurately represented their thoughts or conform to their conception of themselves. Their personal feelings must be respected and as far as possible, protected (Houghton et al., 2010).

While I was obtaining participants' informed consent, I deliberately gave the interviewees time to decide what to do and made it clear that, even after giving consent, they could decide to withdraw it. I assured them that they could continue to ponder the implications after the interview and withdraw if they were not happy with the procedure. I emphasised there would be no reason to fear adverse consequences for a refusal to take part.

The confidentiality of our discussions in terms of participants' anonymity and the danger that what they said they could be traced back to them was also discussed. It seemed particularly important to me because all of us live in the same small town, so I would need to take particular care that all the participants' confidentiality was respected. One of the students had events in her history that would make her and the location immediately recognisable to readers who happened to have knowledge of the area. We discussed this and she assured me this would not cause her any difficulty. Her history was well known locally and she had never tried to hide it, but was proud of what she had achieved subsequently, so would not mind if any reader recognised her from the information. I had similar concerns that teachers might be recognised as the authors of particular comments. However, none of them saw this as a problem and were happy to continue. Nevertheless, I strove to ensure that I would take what steps I could to ensure the identity of participants, people who had shared confidential material, would be concealed (Homan, 2001). I believe I was scrupulous in following procedures to ensure participants could give informed consent (Hammersley, 2007).

During the three years I was in contact with the participants, I did my best to ensure the relationships were friendly, but focused on the research itself. This seemed to work well. I ensured the safety of the participants by arranging for the interviews to take place in the presence, or within easy reach, of another person, in an adjoining office or room. .

Wherever they were held, I ensured the participants were safe and had easy access to

others.

During the interviews, I assumed the interviewees were committed to being truthful and were to be respected and heard attentively, empathically, sympathetically and non-judgementally. However, I was also aware that there could also be other personal pressures of which they might be scarcely conscious pushing them to tell their stories with a particular emphasis. I was determined that nothing I did in relation to the stories at any stage should do any interviewee any harm. The retelling in the research report should be faithful to the original account, not allowing my voice or my interests as the researcher to prevent the interviewee's story from being heard (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). I concentrated on and analysed the actual findings rather than those I might have expected or hoped for. The consistent intention was to avoid the danger of unwittingly using the voices of those interviewed as mouthpieces for my personal views or hopes (Fine, 1994). I acknowledged my responsibility to the interviewees should remain until the whole research process had been completed and, in matters of confidentiality, would continue afterwards.

Care was taken in the interviews to ensure participants were not unduly distressed by the content or process of the exercise. In a small number of cases, documentary sources cited had to be made anonymous to hide the identity of the area and institutions in which the research was carried out.

One issue arose relating to descriptive validity, the accurate representation of the data and respect for the interviewees. A transcript could lose descriptive validity if it failed to include an accurate representation of exactly what an interviewee had said and how it had been said (Maxwell, 1992), as this could distort the meaning, feeling or emotion being conveyed by the interviewee. In this particular research, the accuracy of the transcripts of exactly what interviewees said could be challenged. In transcription, the issue arose of

whether to write a faithful transcription or a faithful representation of what had been said. The students and most of the teachers speak in the local dialect, which created problems of comprehension and of potentially unhelpful reactions to regional varieties of English. The first few transcriptions were faithful representations of exactly what had been said. However, my fear was that such representations could shift attention away from what was being said to the dialect being used and how ideas were being expressed. Consequently, in transcribing the remaining interviews, I aimed for representations faithful to the content and tone, but closer to Standard English so the content of the interviews would not be negatively affected by the way the ideas had been expressed. I did not want readers to misrecognise the interviewees, mistaking their dialect for a sign of ignorance and unfitness for the university careers to which four of them had aspired.

During the period of the research, my concern appeared to be justified in an unexpected way. However, it also raised ethical issues relating to protecting a participant's self-image and self-respect. An interviewee requested a transcript of her interview. As it happened, it was an exact transcription of what she had said. She did not read it for more than a year and was very upset indeed when she did. She felt it made her appear ignorant and uneducated and wanted to withdraw from the project. I was able to sympathise with her; tell her I had already had serious reservations about the form of the transcripts and showed her how her words had been represented in a different way in the thesis drafts. When she saw the revised transcripts, faithful in representation of her thoughts and feelings and without local dialect features, she was reassured and decided to remain in the project. She believed she had been heard, understood and respected; that I had shown a proper concern for her feelings and accepted that fidelity to exactly what is said is less important than maintaining participants' self-respect. Nevertheless, I was confident I had not behaved unethically in changing the form of the transcripts, as I was convinced they now represented the participants' contributions more effectively and without compromising the

integrity of the research. This episode reinforced my concern that others might misrepresent her and her fellow students as inferior and unworthy, rather than different. It was an important moment, reminding me of the need for scrupulous respect for the working class female students in the research:

(Working class women participating in research) are aware of their place, of how they are socially positioned and the attempts to represent them...

Recognition does not occur without value judgements and the women are constantly aware of the judgements of real and imaginary others. Recognition of how one is positioned is central to the process of subjective construction (Skeggs, 1997b, p. 4).

I tried at all times to show the respect I genuinely had for the participants and what they had achieved.

Before the research began, I submitted my proposal to the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee and it was approved. From what has been written here, it is clear that, I followed the guidance in *Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants* (Open University Human Research Ethics Committee, 2014) during my research. I observed the protocol for obtaining valid consent, and being open and honest about the purpose and content of the research. I took all reasonable steps to ensure participants did not come to harm and that their confidentiality was respected. I behaved professionally at all times.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the methods used in the research and the methodological

principles and philosophical assumptions underpinning them and has defended the qualitative interpretivist research position and its ontological and epistemological assumptions. It has examined rigorously a number of issues relating to method and methodology. Since interviews were the main source of the data in this research the chapter has given particular attention to them, their physical and social context, their form and content. It has reviewed the way they were conducted in this research and identified some misjudgements, which could have inhibited the free and open sharing of experiences, at least initially

The chapter has included an explanation of the steps taken to avoid compromising the validity of the research and has considered the research perspective and design, including the use of an auto/biographical approach, the application of the three capitals to the students' accounts of their experiences and their gains and losses; the themed analysis used to identify the most important and recurring themes in the students' identification of the outcomes of their experiences. It has emphasised the importance of identifying insider and outsider issues and their potential influence, not always positive, on the researcher's work. Finally, it has reviewed the ethical issues, particularly as they applied to this specific research, and the steps taken to ensure all those involved were treated with proper respect and their interests, confidentiality and privacy protected as far as possible. It explains that when this could not be guaranteed, this was shared with those interviewed and mutual agreement reached about how to proceed

The following conclusions are drawn from the chapter:

Each of the two approaches and the emergent conceptual model, BLARE, used to generate, analyse and interpret data, enhanced and illuminated the research and provided insights that would otherwise have been absent. However, the significance of the three capitals

model was not always self-evident and required further elucidation and explanation if misunderstandings were to be avoided or findings misread.

The interviews had proved fit for purpose and effective in eliciting rich data from those interviewed. However, I as researcher had made misjudgements which could have inhibited interviewees and prevented open sharing of experiences, at least initially, although the richness of data generated indicates this did not happen. Nevertheless, there were things I would do differently if I were conducting the interviews again, notably making different choices of clothes and changing the layout of some interview rooms.

The ethical issues as they applied to this research had been addressed and resolved in an appropriate way which had been approved by interviewees directly concerned.

All reasonable steps were taken to ensure the research was properly and ethically conducted while remaining capable of revealing genuine insights into the experiences of those interviewed.

In the following chapter, the data from the learners' interviews are examined and interpreted using theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Under the main theme of the perceived benefits of non-traditional adults' returning to learning, seven subthemes are identified and scrutinised.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STUDENTS' STORIES

Introduction

The chapter begins with brief biographies of the seven participants providing a personal context to the detailed analysis of their experiences. The stories are then scrutinised more closely and in the process a main theme emerges, *The Benefits and Losses of Learning*, and seven sub-themes, which provide the structure within which the participants' experiences are explored.

The students' stories are organised in two sections. The individual adult student of the year award winners are presented in the first section. When they enrolled at the learning centre, they were making a long term commitment to their studies with the intention of going on to higher education and moving into secure, well paid and more prestigious occupations.

Those who reached their goal are listed first and the others according to how far they had progressed on their learning journey at the time the research ended in 2016. The three members of the healthy cooking lessons project, winners of a special group award in 2009, are presented in the second section. The team leader is listed first and the other two team members after her. The reason for separating the groups is that their motives for learning were different, which affected the nature of their involvement both in the centre and in their learning. The members of the healthy cooking group enrolled to pursue their interest in cooking and then chose to share their expertise with others in their community. They did not have a formal, long term commitment to their learning or any intention of using it to obtain employment in the foreseeable future.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF THE STUDENTS

The individual award winners

Emma (2006)

Emma, 39, left school at 16 without qualifications, became pregnant soon after and married. The marriage had bad patches and some violence. Sixteen years later, the mother of three daughters, she enrolled at the Learning Centre. She began by studying basic and general interest, enrichment courses; volunteering for two hours a week at a drop-in centre and working as a Learning Ambassador recruiting potential students. Some paid youth work followed and a gradual increase in hours. Emma decided she wanted to do youth work. She ended her marriage after taking a course on women's place in the world. She won the Adult Learner award in 2006 for commitment, progress, and supporting other learners. She did a youth work diploma at a new university, converting it to a 2.1 honours degree. She is now employed as a lead youth worker by Moorsmills Council, is seeking promotion and has a new partner.

Clare (2005)

Clare, 44, is the seventh of eight siblings with three different fathers. Five, the first father's children, were taken into care. One was murdered; another died of AIDS; a third is a sex worker and drug addict. The second father, Clare's, is a convicted murderer. The youngest child, the third father's, went to university, has an MA and is in a profession.

Clare's school career was stormy and she left without qualifications. She has had three children, now 25, 12 and 7, with three different partners. After various low paid jobs and convictions for disorderly behaviour, social drug taking and possession, she returned to education intermittently and then began an Access course at the learning centre. A few weeks later, spontaneously reacting to an assault, she broke a bottle in the face of her second daughter's father. In May, 2005, she was convicted of causing grievous bodily

harm and, in the same week, won the adult student of the year award. Barred from a social work degree because of her conviction, she took a community studies degree, followed by a PGDE. She taught briefly on supply at the learning centre, left and became a part time worker for a local volunteer network. She won the NIACE Regional Student of the Year award in 2013 (NIACE, 2013) for promoting learning in the community. The volunteer network closed soon afterwards and she had difficulty in finding permanent work. After a long period of voluntary work for the town's community network, she became a voluntary member of a planning committee for a new youth club. The chair of the committee, impressed by her work, had the ban on her working with young people lifted. Clare became a full time fund raiser and youth club worker in early 2016. In November, 2016, she left that job for a similar, but much less well paid, one with a local boxing club. The town's community network has applied for charity status. If the application succeeds, Clare hopes to have a paid position as the charity coordinator.

Kate (2010)

Kate, 55, was nominated for the award in four consecutive years, winning it the fourth time. She was the youngest of five children in a very happy family but felt she might have been overprotected by her parents and was the only sibling to fail the 11+. She enjoyed secondary school, but did not do well. She went to work in an office and married at 21. The relationship was violent. After eighteen months, she was in a refuge with her year old son. Thirteen years later, she met Terry, moved with him to Loomstown and had another son. When her son was six, she went to the Learning Centre and eventually enrolled. Surprisingly, she became a Learning Ambassador, recruiting other people to become students before she had actually taken any courses herself. She enrolled in the basic skills maths Access course and failed, but saw success in having taken the exam. She passed subsequently. Anne, a teacher, recognised her willingness to help other students and developed her as a support worker. Kate was eventually appointed to work with vulnerable

adults. She was preparing to begin a part time foundation degree in learning support when her partner was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He recovered, but, in 2015, left Kate unexpectedly. Kate had a breakdown and their son failed all his 'A' level examinations. After six months she returned to work, but postponed her foundation degree course indefinitely. She remained a passionate supporter of the award, believing it had changed her identity and given her more confidence.

Melanie (2011)

Melanie, 44, was the winner in 2011. She left school with several CSE passes, began work in an office, but became a single parent at 17 and had to stop work. Three years later she met her future husband and had three more children. Melanie did evening work as a sewing machinist, becoming a supervisor. She had always wanted to be a midwife but had to wait until the family could afford it before she could enrol on level one and two Access courses. She received the award in 2011 for dedication and willingness to help others. She moved to a level three Access course at Moorsmills College and won the College Learner's Award for Progression in 2012. In 2013, she deferred her studies, initially for twelve months, to look after her sick son. She had passed the Access course, but the universities now required GCSE Science, Maths and English for midwifery degree students. Her adult daughter, now 28, inspired by her mother's example, returned to study when her son reached nursery age and began her midwifery degree at a nearby university in 2015. Melanie's son recovered and began a university course. However, Melanie became ill, which further delayed her studies. It seems unlikely Melanie will now achieve her ambition because of anxiety about having to pay fees for a midwifery degree. However, she believes the award gave her a new confidence which she hopes will sustain her in whatever lies ahead, in spite of, 'constantly having the wind knocked out of my sails'.

The group award winners

Marjorie

Marjorie, 40, had had poor educational experiences up to the age of sixteen. Although she had been an exceptionally able pupil at school, she had suffered from depression and, later, addiction and other mental health issues. She had truanted from school for the last two years, attending only the lessons she liked. She married soon afterwards and had a son, but the marriage ended and she became ill with depression. She was persuaded to attend the cookery lessons at the learning centre, after which the MAVIS group (the name is an acronym formed by the initial letters of the members' forenames), which took healthy cooking lessons into the community, was founded. She greatly enjoyed its period of success and her mental health improved. When the project closed, she and two others continued to use the name MAVIS and once a week cooked meals for a small group of three people at a local church hall. She still attended classes at Moorsmills College, but at a different centre.

Violet and Shirley

Both in their middle 30s, they were members of MAVIS, when it won the group award in 2009. When interviewed together, Violet and Shirley were very close friends, both single parents of two children living in Waterfield. Violet had been brought up in a close family; Shirley had not. Violet had done reasonably well at school; Shirley had struggled. They had both loved the period of success with MAVIS and were still attached to its values, eating healthily themselves and promoting healthy eating through their part time work on a mobile greengrocery and fruit shop. Shirley had maintained the four stone weight loss she had achieved when MAVIS was operating.

THE THEMES

The students' stories are structured through the process of theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focuses on the learners' perceptions of the difficulties they faced, how

they responded, the benefits they received and the gains they made, as well as any losses they may have incurred. It presents recurring, significant subthemes across the students' narratives. Under the main theme, *The Benefits and Losses of Learning*, seven subthemes emerged relating directly to the learners' experiences and the importance of the part played by the presence or absence of particular benefits in their lives.

The analysis is in two parts and begins with the experience of the four individual award winners. The second part, repeats the process for the three group winners. Each theme is taken in turn and analyses each participant's experience relating to the theme. The analysis has been described as a *montage*, because each portrayal builds on and is juxtaposed with the others and becomes part of a newly created picture, yielding insights gleaned from the similarities and contrasts between the different experiences.

The main theme

- The benefits and losses of learning.

The seven sub-themes

- employment status and income;
- a learner identity and learning;
- community involvement;
- level of confidence;
- management of health and well-being;
- level of achievement;
- family life.

THE AWARD WINNERS

The individual award winners

Sub-theme 1: Employment status and income

Table 5.1 presents the employment status of the individual adult students of the year before they began their courses at Loomstown and in 2016.

Table 5.1: The individual award winners and their changes in economic status				
Name	Award and Year	Employment before beginning course	Employment in 2016	Economic Status
Emma	Individual 2006	Shop work, bar work, Cleaning	Youth Worker since 2011	Much improved
Clare	Individual 2005	Shop work, market work, bar work, beautician,	Youth Worker briefly in 2016	Briefly much improved
Kate	Individual 2010	Household work	Learner Support Worker	Initially slightly improved
Melanie	Individual 2011	Skilled work in sewing, accounts	Interrupted Studies	Unchanged

The ranking according to how the employment status of the four individual winners changed is not as straightforward as it might appear. Three continued studying for several years after completing their level one and two basic skills courses, while one, Kate, began her work soon afterwards. At the end of 2016, the employment status of both Emma and Kate had improved as a direct result of their return to learning. Clare's situation had improved, but only briefly, because she had the well-paid youth work job for only a few months.

Emma had moved from casual jobs in bars, shops and cleaning offices to youth work, a major change, which transformed her economic situation and brought with it other personal benefits, increased identity and social capital. **Clare** is an example of the difficulty in separating the influence of learning and other influences on developments in people's lives. She obtained her degree, but her criminal record meant the qualification

had diminished purchasing power. When she did eventually gain a well-paid job, her impatience with the running of her workplace caused her to resign. Although she increased her human capital briefly and her social capital considerably, she had not gained the identity capital which might have helped her to cross over the dispositional barrier constructed between her and her workplace. She had achieved her ambition for well-paid employment, but could not sustain it. Over all, there was a loss of the economic security she sought. **Kate** was successful in getting the job she wanted as an educational support worker. However, the pay was poor, which did not worry her while she was with her partner, but left her seriously impoverished when he left her. She did gain benefits from her work, particularly identity and social capital, but not enough human capital to give her economic security, so this too has been a loss. Although **Melanie** was probably the most able of the individual winners, she did not reach her goal, but was able to return to the work she had been doing before starting the course. Dispositional and situational barriers prevented her from obtaining better paid and more secure work, so this too has been a loss.

Emma had been in a very difficult marriage and felt she was imprisoned by her inability to earn a decent wage:

But always through my late twenties, it felt as though I could never get out of the relationship because he was the one that was bringing the money into the home. I had no qualifications, No experience. I was trapped. (Emma)

Emma's problems are evidence of a structural weakness and inequality in her marriage. Her husband had a well-paid job, so she worked as a full time homemaker. However, this meant she had no financial independence, having no income other than what her husband gave her and the small amounts she earned from part-time casual jobs. Emma's lack of qualifications and work experience confined any employment opportunities to low paid

work. Since she, in common with all the other winners, was assumed to be solely responsible for the care of her children, her freedom to take control of decisions about the direction her life might take was limited. This was an example of class and gender intersecting in her family's expectations of her and restricted her opportunities.

Emma began her course wanting to obtain a good job, but with no idea of what she wanted to do. Her employment situation was transformed by her studies and qualifications and the doors they opened for her. Through her course-based voluntary work, she became interested in youth work, studied for a degree in community studies and obtained a permanent, salaried youth worker's post with the local authority:

I'm enjoying working full time. Professionally I'm already thinking I want to be on that ladder, the management ladder. I can see it and I'm working towards it (Emma).

Her human capital continued to increase and her much improved financial situation was a strong benefit. She could earn enough to support herself and foresee a future in which it might improve still further. Her decision to leave her husband while she was still a student had been economically very difficult, but it enabled her to achieve the financial and emotional independence she had craved. This and her relationship with her new partner after she had graduated augmented her identity capital.

Clare, who throughout her twenties moved between low paid, casual jobs, discovered friends from school had returned to education, in some cases studied for degrees and moved into permanent jobs:

I was made up for them (pleased), but I knew I could run rings round them

(Clare).

It confirmed what she already knew, that she had very little human capital and without a return to education and the acquisition of qualifications, her earning power would always be slight. As a single mother, she found living on benefits and income from part-time jobs very difficult. It seemed there were no clear arrangements in place for her daughters' fathers to support them adequately. If the family's economic situation was going to improve, it would be largely through her efforts. She knew the job she wanted to do. She believed her dysfunctional family background had equipped her with the empathy needed to be a social worker, which would greatly improve her family's economic position. However, she faced an institutional barrier to the employment she wanted when her conviction for causing grievous bodily harm disqualified her from the work. Consequently, she began a degree in community studies, followed by a post graduate diploma enabling her to teach in further education. She worked briefly as a supply teacher at the Loomstown Centre when she could, but did not enjoy it and faced difficulties with her benefits payments because of the irregular and unpredictable hours of work, so she resigned. She worked for a short time on a community project which closed down and afterwards managed on benefits and bar work. In 2013, Clare said:

I look at my carpet and my carpet's filthy and I've got no money to buy a new car and I just thought, what do I get a focus on now? What's going to keep me thinking, 'Do this, do this,' and it's been really hard. I've just got to keep going... I thought, you get six pounds thirty for barmaiding at The Black Horse. I could after all that have kept out of education and stayed there. I'm lying. I don't want to do barmaiding. (Clare).

Several issues are raised by what happened to Clare. First, her own and society's gendered

expectation was that she as a mother would be responsible for her children's upbringing and care, while any financial commitment from their fathers was difficult to enforce. Secondly, her enrolment on the community studies degree, while understandable, was perhaps hasty. She herself felt she had gone into it initially without worrying too much where it might lead occupationally. Similarly, the teaching diploma course had been offered without any consideration of whether or not teaching was suitable for her. Since the main reason for her return to education had been to improve her family's economic position, it was important she chose courses that might help her to achieve that. The benefit of developing a love of learning should not be ignored, but the likely future financial implications should be considered too. She had not gathered enough human capital, so incurred a financial loss.

In 2016, her voluntary work on the youth club committee and the social capital she accrued from it led to full time employment as a youth club worker. It seemed her investment in learning and voluntary work had dismantled institutional barriers and brought her the financial returns she had sought, but dispositional barriers meant the gains were short-lived. The lack of a well-paid job has been a considerable loss for Clare

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Kate, like Emma, found work she could enjoy during her studies. Her job as a volunteer classroom assistant led to a part time paid contract, gradually increased to thirty hours a week:

They just give you a couple of hours. It makes you feel there's money here, this is my job, and it helps your self-esteem. I felt really good with myself that I was getting, I think it was two hours, and then it went to about five hours and grew from there (Kate).

Kate's identity capital had been enhanced by the job, but her human capital was not sufficient to bring her well paid work. When her partner, Terry, left her, Kate was ill with depression for about six months. Her job was term time only and her income insufficient to support her and her son. Initially, Kate had hoped a foundation degree might lead to better remunerated work, but now feels it is unlikely she will ever be able to do it, partly because she is no longer physically robust enough to take on the challenge, but also because it might entail further fees commitments which she could not honour. Kate has experienced a mixture of benefit and loss, but the loss has been considerable.

Melanie had wanted to be a midwife all her life, but was also aware a midwife's salary would transform her family's income. However, she could not afford to give up work:

We couldn't afford for me to go, not on my husband's wages, so I thought, right, I'll wait a bit longer until (my youngest child) is a bit older and then I don't have to pay for childcare, and then I came to the centre (Melanie).

The family's constrained financial circumstances delayed her enrolment. Yet, once she had enrolled on the course, Melanie's studies went well until she hit a situational and dispositional barrier. Her seventeen year old son became ill with type 1 diabetes and she suspended her studies immediately to care for him. She accepted unquestioningly this was what she should do and did not seek alternative solutions:

Well, that's what we women have to do because we've had children, haven't we? (Melanie)

This illustrates the expectations of family members and sometimes the women themselves about family obligations constraining some women's return to education (McGivney,

1990). Caring for her son became her new employment and overrode all other demands on her time. This is rarely something expected of a husband, a male partner or a father, yet it may be simply assumed that a mother will do it. Melanie's learning has not led to the increased earnings of a midwife, an economic loss.

Sub-theme 2: a learner identity and learning:

The first task faced by the returning adult learners and recognised by them was to acquire a learner identity which included convincing themselves they were genuine learners. Some achieved it quickly; others took longer. Their experience of school had not necessarily been particularly bad as far as they were concerned, although others might feel they were let down by the low expectations of their teachers and decisions too easily made that they would not gain from education. All the participants had left school with modest qualifications or none. A lack of achievement can be misrecognised as an indicator of a lack of ability, so many are left with identities as failed learners that they must shake off (McGivney, 2001), a greater problem for some than for others and one faced by some participants..

Emma had wanted to return to education, but lacked the confidence. She was invited by a friend to accompany her to the learning centre:

And I kept saying, 'I can't. No, I can't,' and she said, 'I'll come with you. I'll meet you.' This went on for a couple of weeks and she said, 'Just come and have a brew and look round. Come and see what it's like,' so I went along and that was it. When I went into the lesson, I thought, 'They're quite like me really,' and I'd always worried before that you'd got to be really clever and I'd look a bit stupid, you know, can't do this. (Emma).

Emma's decision to enrol at the centre was a major step forward and a first assertion of power. Within the limits of what was available, she could choose her own learning path and not have it imposed on her as it had been at school. She began to build up her learner identity almost immediately. In discovering the others, already learners, were, 'quite like,' her, she realised she could become like them in other ways and do what they were doing, that is, learning.

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Emma was able to join the free, enrichment courses, notably, *Wider Opportunities for Women*, which equipped her to rethink her marriage and decide it must end. This was clearly a benefit for her, but it was experienced as a loss by her family. While Emma's husband deserved no sympathy, it was understandable that her children found the divorce difficult.

The enrichment courses had been introduced to cover topics students would find interesting and helpful in their daily lives and so persuade them that learning had something worthwhile to offer them, an important factor in acquiring a learner identity through nurturing a love of learning. However, a learner identity is not acquired in a moment. There were several rites of passage for Emma to go through: participating constructively in group discussions; getting good marks for assignments and reassurance that she could cope with the academic study; giving her well-received first talk to the rest of the group; winning the special award. These were all important stages in her empowerment, gradually adding to her accomplishments and pushing forward the boundaries of what she could achieve:

And I'm thinking now, 'This is not a problem. There are loads of people like me in the world. Yes! I'm not at the bottom or in any way close!' (Emma)

Her transformation from feeling an outsider to seeing herself as somebody who belonged to the learning community was in large measure the result of a carefully structured curriculum enabling her to recognise she was making gradual, but steady progress. When she moved on to university, the process was repeated: initial hesitation followed by affirming events and encounters, culminating in receiving her degree.

Now I can hold a conversation with educated people. Now I'm no different from them. (Emma)

At the end of her degree studies, she felt completely at home among educated people, because she now saw herself as one of them. Emma acquired a love of learning fairly quickly and a strong learner identity more gradually.

Clare had no trouble acquiring a learner identity and acquiring a love of learning, but only in the subjects she liked:

I really enjoyed it. It was sonnets and Shakespeare. I loved all that. And then the psychology, I loved that. Simultaneous equations? I loved 'em! (Clare)

However, she was a paradox. Her pleasure in a subject took the pain out of learning, but her lack of self-discipline meant she neglected the subjects she disliked. She loved some of her GCSE studies and gained a grade B pass in her English Language examination without difficulty. However, she hated parts of Maths and Psychology, so initially did not bother to sit the GCSE exams even though she had been entered, which delayed her progress and weakened her motivation. Her problems came less with the study itself than with applying good study habits to all her subjects, which might have made it easier to meet deadlines while running a family and working part-time. This meant that she did not

form as secure a learner identity as others, an expensive loss. Her adoption of a qualified learner identity cut her off from many of learning's benefits. Later, she seemed to have similar difficulties adopting a worker identity in the youth service, which prevented her from persevering in the job. Nevertheless, when she began her degree course, she was enthralled by *Community Studies*, an agreeable surprise because it had not been what she wanted:

I used to think, 'Left wing? Right wing? I don't know what they're on about! I haven't a clue,' so I did the politics modules. I loved it. I felt enriched. I began to learn what was going on in the world instead of living in sheltered ignorance (Clare).

Clare's learning identity was strengthened, as was the identity capital that comes from the experience of success. These were definite gains.

Kate struggled to re-enter education or find a learner identity. Initially, she felt she did not belong:

A neighbour said, 'There's a little college here,' so I thought I'd have a look. I kept saying, 'I'm only looking.' This kept on for about six months. I kept thinking, 'I'm not clever enough. You've not achieved,' so this barrier kept on getting to me (Kate).

However, when she was eventually persuaded to go inside, she found the ethos of the Centre so welcoming and the learning ambassador rôle she was given so congenial that:

After a couple of weeks, I just got this bug. I just got this learning bug (Kate).

Like Emma, she exercised her new found power to shape a new identity and take more control of her situation. She began with the centre's enrichment courses, which appear to have enabled her to overcome her problems with facing the level one Access courses and gave her strength to persevere. She loved being able to share her own learning struggles with other learners as a way of encouraging them to keep going as she had done. She had failed her level two Access test in numeracy, but took pride in having made the attempt:

I felt so proud of myself that I'd gone into a Maths class and into an exam.... I think I was just four points short and I was so proud that I'd sat the exam I decided to go into it again. So I've achieved that. I've passed my maths
(Kate).

This was a genuine achievement. Having committed herself to being a student, she was able to incorporate the setback of a failure into the experience, from which she could move on and eventually pass. She had acquired a strong learner identity and love of learning.

Melanie had resumed her educational journey without too much trepidation:

I found the book (listing the courses available) and once I started, I couldn't stop doing them. I'd got the bug! (Melanie)

She enjoyed the courses related to learning and those intended to help students manage their day to day lives more effectively. After she had to suspend her studies, she said,

*Even though I've had this this set back, it's still worth it because I've achieved.
Even if nothing happened, although I'm sure it will, I've learned so much, it's*

unbelievable. (Melanie).

Her experience of learning was totally positive and her learner identity secure.

Sub-theme 3: community involvement

The benefit to the community from a student's engagement in education embraces the identifiable returns for the community and its members from its investment in the individual student's resumed engagement (Schuller, 2004). Among these, voluntary work is predicted as a likely outcome and benefit of an adult's return to education (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). Voluntary social and community participation produces significant benefits for the community (Feinstein et al., 2008), providing services that would not otherwise be available. The community funds the learner who then is able to contribute to the community's well-being, a worthwhile return from the community's investment (Schuller, 2004).

The community learning ambassadors

The Community Learning Ambassadors project trained students to recruit other adults to the centre and to do voluntary work in the community, which often led to employment opportunities later. One of the community benefits of this project was that because so many learners stayed in Loomstown, the local community could benefit from the contributions they made as a result of their learning experiences. Students were never cut off from the community in which they hoped to gain a more secure employment footing.

The Community Learning Ambassadors project was pioneered in Moorsmills and Loomstown and played its part in demonstrating that adults from the target groups could be successfully recruited to level one and two Access courses and then move on to level three courses and beyond. Both Emma and Kate were recruited by women already studying at

Loomstown, although neither was an ambassador, a possible indication that sharing its benefits with others in the community was part of the centre's culture. Learners were enrolled on an Ambassadors' induction course for nine two-hour sessions with fees of £87, waived if they worked as ambassadors subsequently. Learners contracted to fulfil their ambassadors' rôles for a specified period, but many continued the work until they left the centre. The ambassadors were far more than the learning centre's recruitment officers.

Emma had been at the centre for a year before she became interested in the Ambassadors programme and decided to enrol. She was enjoying her studies so much and her appreciation of their value was so great that she increased her work with them and became a very successful recruiting agent for the courses. She had discovered the benefits of an adult returning to education for herself, so was a powerful advocate for what it could achieve:

It was just fantastic because of my experience and where I had come from in leaving school and not having educational experience. I just knew how important education was. I just wanted to break barriers down for the other people to get in, getting them across the threshold, yes (Emma).

The voluntary work gave Emma the opportunities she needed. She knew she wanted to work with young people, but was unsure what was possible. Her teachers suggested she approached a youth club and a drop-in centre. She was offered two hours' work a week in both places.

I enjoyed working with the staff (at the youth club). I was learning a lot more about young people and their issues and how to tackle some of them. And only about five months later I ended up getting a sixteen hour (paid) post working at

the drop in. (Emma)

At Loomstown, there was a conscious policy to discover what students enjoyed and could learn to do well, and to guide them towards voluntary work that would let them explore what they might achieve in paid employment. This enabled them to build up their human capital and was a clear benefit for Emma.

Clare did not become an ambassador, but developed a gift for getting others to work with her on community projects. She acted as the key worker in several community groups and in the Loomstown Community Network, a very active organisation co-ordinating the work of voluntary groups in the town and disseminating good practice among them. Clare coordinated and found funding for a mothers and toddlers group in a deprived area and led a successful fundraising initiative to provide a wheelchair for a severely disabled local teenager. In 2013, Clare explained:

So I just keep doing this (the voluntary work) and getting experience. When I go for a job in another couple of years I can say I've been doing this for three or four years and no violence, no drugs. I'm getting a wealth of experience (Clare).

She was accumulating more human and social capital all the time. It led to the employment she sought, but not for very long. The voluntary group she was leading applied to be registered for official charity status, although advisors warned it might be too small for this to be practical. Clare said:

I'm hoping this will allow us to take our community involvement to a new level and allow me to combine my passion for the town with earning a decent living.

(Clare)

It seemed as if her life had gone full circle. In 2016, she was saying virtually the same thing as she had said in 2013. The return to education had given Clare new opportunities. The use she made of them was in her hands.

Kate, like Emma, found her vocation while studying. As part of her community involvement she became a voluntary support worker. She believed the Community Learning Ambassadors' programme had been vital to her development as a learner and had ensured she was fully involved in her community as a support worker in the centre and a centre recruiting officer in her community. Her ambassadorial work increased her social capital and led directly to her employment as a classroom support worker.

Melanie never became formally involved with volunteering. However, in both her award citations she was praised for the support she had given other students. This emphasis on helping one another has been identified as attractive to returning adult learners, because it is a positive contrast with compulsory education where the emphasis is often on competition (Power et al., 2011).

Sub-theme 4: The fourth benefit: level of confidence

‘Confidence is a belief in one’s own abilities to do something in a specific situation – this belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation... (It) includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation’ (Eldred et al., 2006, p. 4).

Emma used the word, ‘confidence’ and its cognates fourteen times. She seemed to require continued reassurance throughout her studies until she graduated. She was constantly and

consistently given it which seemed to be due to the strong motivational practices within the learning centre and the university. The first confidence boost was actually meeting her fellow learners and not feeling out of place. The second was finding through the Ambassadors programme she had a natural gift for working with young people. The third was taking part in group activities and feeling at ease. The fourth and most important was finally having the confidence to decide her husband should leave,

*... by agreement. Yes, my confidence had grown that much and I'm thinking,
"What do I want in my life? A career, a happy home and..." So we...he'd left!*
(Emma)

She now felt free, which itself gave her confidence. A key part of her philosophy was that everything should be done in small steps to ensure steady progress. Because of this, she found the basic literacy skills courses, criticised for being too limited in their potential to develop literacy (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012), very helpful. She found them,

*... confidence building, and then you're stepping up to the next level or two,
questioning whether you're quite capable of doing it. Are your written skills up
to the standard they want?* (Emma)

She valued the adult student of the year award for,

... the confidence you get from it to ask, 'And what's the next step?' (Emma)

A highlight of her university career had been when she got her first essay back:

I'll always remember the comment. It was, 'Very well written'. I thought, Is that me? 'Very well written'! And that boosts your confidence (Emma).

This 'small step' enabled her to revise her expectations. It marked the moment when she seriously began to believe that the occupation she sought could satisfy the ambitions she had brought with her to university.

When Emma received her degree, any remaining lack of confidence seemed to disappear. The degree confirmed she was a genuinely educated person who could now mingle comfortably with other successful graduates and not feel out of place. Her initial lack of confidence had been inherited from her parents and made worse through her depression about her unhappy marriage. She had increased all three forms of capital and was ready to move forward. When she graduated, her parents were there:

I could see their faces. They were so proud. I think my mother was wishing she'd done the same (Emma).

Clare's family had been, in her words, 'dysfunctional,' and her adult lifestyle had been wild. One motive for returning to education was her fear she was setting a bad example to her eldest daughter and might be shunned by other mothers:

I thought, 'Her friends won't come round here. Their mums won't let them' (Clare).

Any feelings of well-being, confidence and self-esteem derived from her studies were sometimes outweighed by continuing problems in her personal life. Judith, the former head of centre, understood her best and continued to support her long after she had left the

centre:

Things keep dragging her back and the psychological dramas of all the things that have happened to her will never leave Clare. They're always in her head, but she still keeps getting past them and, of course, it's going to be like that.
(Judith)

In this sense, the legacy of Clare's past was an enduring obstacle to her taking full advantage of the opportunities learning brought. This was a loss she seemed never quite able to overcome.

Kate was the only student to have taken the 11+, an examination, now largely discarded, taken in the UK at 10 or 11 to determine whether a child should go to an academic grammar school or to a less academic secondary modern school. Kat had 'failed' and gone to a secondary modern school. Her return to learning had been motivated in part by a desire to heal her wounds. Her confidence gradually grew, although she found the basic skills courses difficult. However, she had,

...realised that everything is like stepping stones. It's softly, softly. Get one thing out of the way at a time (Kate).

When she found her support of others was so valued that she was given a paid job to do it, her confidence increased further:

You have to be CRB checked, so it's all above board. I had this sense of happiness. (Kate)

When a person values her job, it does more than give her a good income. It creates a new, positive sense of identity strengthened by receiving payment, albeit modest, and an enhanced status. It nurtures self-esteem. The fact that the job was responsible enough to require a Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) check to confirm she was not disqualified from working with vulnerable adults enhanced Kate's self-esteem. However, the benefits of employment can be threatened or destroyed by events unrelated to the employment itself. The unexpected end of her relationship with her partner brought unforeseen losses. It drained her confidence in all areas of her life and damaged her self-esteem. While she has done her best to rebuild her life, in spite of serious financial problems, only time will tell how successful her efforts might be. Before Kate's life took a turn for the worse, Judith, the head of centre, said that many of the students would not reach their chosen destinations or greatly improve their lives, because,

Too many of life's disasters get in the way (Judith).

Kate was not the only student for whom this proved true. She experienced serious losses in her personal life. Any stability she may have regained came from her work. However, the confidence and success she had lost would not be restored quickly.

Melanie did not lack confidence or self-esteem. She quickly became so engaged with her courses that she had no worries about being unable to cope with them. She valued the student of the year award because it meant others whose opinion she respected had confidence in her. She believed her study programme had been structured so well that it went from being easy to challenging without her realising it was happening:

For me, the courses were always 'doable' and you felt you'd achieved something, and I think this may be it. It's not that it's too hard, but it's too hard

too soon for people to get their confidence, because that's the key thing.

(Melanie)

Melanie's comment shows how well she – and her teachers - understood the importance of an appropriate pace for learning. She recognised a potentially difficult road to learning had become a smooth path.

Sub-theme 5: management of health and well-being

Any established link between learning and improved mental health and wellbeing is important. Every year, 25% of British adults are diagnosed with a mental health problem, which could lead to physical illness, prolonged absence from work, unemployment, strained domestic relationships and family breakdown (Mental Health Foundation, 2011). Involvement in education reduces the problems and any gains made will last for at least twelve months, a relatively inexpensive way of dealing with a potentially very costly problem (Mental Health Foundation, 2011). In addition, adult education is even more likely to produce indirect health benefits because self-efficacy, autonomy and agency improve for all those who take part (Field, 2008). Health and well-being appear to be closely associated with one another. Improvements in the latter are likely to bring improvements in the former,

Emma was very depressed during most of the years of her unhappy marriage, although she did not claim it made her mentally ill:

It wasn't a great relationship; it could sometimes be quite violent. He was out drinking. Drinking was involved a lot, he was always out drinking. I'd make sure the children were upstairs, out of the way because you never knew how angry he was going to be. Always it felt as though I could never get out of the

relationship... he was the one that was bringing the money into the home. I had no qualifications, No experience.... (Emma)

Her confidence and self-esteem improved while she was a student. Once she had her degree, she shook off any depression she had felt earlier and has enjoyed a stable life both at home and at work since:

*I've got a new partner now and I always thought I would never get anybody.
And he's intelligent as well so we can have good discussions. I'm quite happy.
I've achieved. I'm enjoying life. (Emma)*

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Clare, influenced by the disappointments she faced after graduation, particularly her inability to find well paid and secure work, went through periods of depression for several years:

Like the last few months I have been getting a bit down thinking why did I even bother to do it? (Clare)

Her achievements as a learner were not sufficient to bring her a sense of well-being. They were less important in themselves than as means to an end. They did not bring her a sense of achievement,

... because (they've) not got me anywhere. I just want to be able to be not worrying about money all the time. (Clare)

Kate, as a child, had suffered from depression and felt her 11+ failure had pushed her to the margin of the family, although nothing her parents said led her to think this:

They never said anything, but I just felt it. (Kate)

During her years as an adult returner to education and as a classroom support worker, her confidence grew stronger and stronger:

I really enjoy the support work, I feel comfortable, because I'm really helping.

When I go home, I feel really good. (Kate)

Her sense of well-being ended abruptly when her partner left and it seemed as if the benefits she had gained from her learning were in danger of draining away because of the losses in her personal life:

I think about it all the time. I can't think of anything else. (Kate)

Melanie always seemed a very well-adjusted person, very dedicated to her family, sometimes treasuring her rôle as a mother, but sometimes feeling it was sucking her personality away:

When you come to the college you are doing something for yourself. When you're a full time mum, your life revolves around the kids and you don't do anything for yourself. How many times I used to say to myself, 'It's all kids, housework, washing!' I never did anything. I used to just be at home with the kids. If I was working, it was just working, kids, working, but when I started doing this, it was a break from the kids, a break from the house. I was doing something I wanted to do. It was good. It was good... I've got a life now. I can be a person as well... It's as if I'm getting back some power! I can't wait

to start again (Melanie).

As she made clear, her career at the centre brought her a new, prized identity and sense of well-being. She was able to value herself for her personal achievements as well as for being a dedicated mother. Melanie was the strongest example of a person defined by her parenthood, although all the participants took their responsibility as main carers of their children very seriously. None of them questioned it or suggested that society's expectations of them were wrong or unjust. Their studies were built round their children in a way that very few men's would be. Their class and gender seemed to intersect in a way that created unjust expectations. While Melanie saw her identity as a mother as central to who she was, occasionally she revealed how difficult and constraining that identity could be, although it did not make her mentally ill. Her student identity gave her a new sense of herself and not solely as a person defined by her relationship with her children. Being a student again meant she had become an independent being with her own interests and ambitions and new identity capital:

It was just like I could be me... Rather than just being a mum, I can be a person as well. (Melanie)

When she had to suspend her studies, unlike other participants in the research, she was not adversely affected by the setback. Her renewed sense of well-being survived both her son's illness and her own treatment when it was feared she had cancer. It is uncertain that she will be able to return to her studies, but her sense of well-being remained and was still intact when the research ended in 2016.

Sub-theme 6: level of achievement

In this context, the first question to be answered is: what counts as achievement? In

conventional academic discourse, it is reaching a certain agreed standard when being tested on one's knowledge or understanding of a particular topic that has been studied. A person is seen as either passing or failing subject examinations, such as English, Maths or Science, for example. Success in examinations may allow a person to be admitted to a higher level course or to a particular profession (Steinmayr et al., 2015). Achievement seems to be synonymous with gaining qualifications. Academic achievement in this sense was certainly important at Loomstown. The individual award winners saw it as a measure of their progress and success. However, their celebration of their achievements was not confined to the classroom.

Emma saw her achievements, of which there were many, as a long series of small steps, which made the journey manageable both psychologically and practically. Enrolment at the college was an achievement, a sign she had broken the family expectation that the benefits of education were not for them. It meant her complete lack of confidence had been overcome. Each short course and module passed, each new skill learned and mastered reinforced the change in her identity to somebody who was a *bona fide* student. In addition to her academic achievements, she valued her success as a recruiting officer for the centre and as a volunteer youth worker, which led to full time, paid work. She valued the confidence and new outlook she had acquired through her enrichment courses and the confidence they had given her to walk away from her marriage. Two achievements stood out for her: becoming the adult student of the year in 2006 and graduating in 2011. She remembered the presentation evening as a wonderful moment which,

...made the award seem important and it made me think what I'd achieved, what I'd come through. You're going along day by day on a daily basis and then it stops and makes you think, 'Oh, how far I've come and how much further can I go?' (Emma)

Its importance was not as an end in itself, but as recognition of how far she had travelled and encouragement she could go even further. She remembered her graduation as, ‘*lovely, beautiful, I really enjoyed it.*’ The sense of well-being it brought engendered the confidence that she was as good as the people she had once feared:

In social circles I feel now I can contribute to the conversations, you know, if it's on politics just basic conversations you feel as though you can contribute, whereas in the past I would step away, probably make an excuse and go to the toilet because I would be feeling uncomfortable that I might say something stupid. I wouldn't know what they were talking about. But now I can hold a conversation with educated people. Now, I'm no different from them. (Melanie)

It would be difficult to find a better testimonial to the benefits and pleasure that education can bring or the pain that can be felt by a person who feels she lacks it. For Emma, it also brought a new, successful relationship:

I've got a new partner now. And that's another thing as well. I always thought I would never get anybody. I just thought I wanted to have 'me' time and not somebody else. And he's intelligent as well, so there are good discussions.
(Emma)

All the achievements Emma relates can be attributed to her return to learning, some of them unforeseen happy consequences of her new-found confidence spilling over into other areas of her life. The ‘small steps,’ carefully managed by the policies, practices and strategies of the Loomstown Centre and the university she attended later have brought her to her present happy state and an ideal outcome to her learning career.

Clare, uniquely among the award winners, did not use the word, ‘achievement,’ or its cognates once in her interview. However, this did not mean it was unimportant to her. As far as the centre was concerned, she had achieved all she had set out to achieve, which was to go to university and gain a degree. Although this was true, Clare saw a degree as a passport to a well-paid job and respectability, a further benefit of education and the one for which she had aimed. Her criminal conviction was a major setback, but, ironically, her hard work, intended to favourably impress the judge while she was awaiting trial, led to her becoming adult student of the year and a chance to make a new start:

The publicity in the paper, and then the £200 and the trophy, everyone making a fuss... It was great!. After the rough time I'd had, it really did pull me out of it. 'Right, 'I thought, 'this is the beginning of it all' (Clare).

Winning the award led to her success in her Community Studies degree because she felt she could not let her teachers down by giving up, although she frequently wanted to do so. After graduation, she did not find the jobs available to her congenial or could not combine them with her parenting responsibilities. She did achieve impressive things in her voluntary work, although it would be difficult to attribute them entirely to her return to learning. She had always been a leader, able to persuade others to support her. Although she experienced a sense of achievement for brief periods, it never seemed to endure. Her own unpredictable behaviour tended to undermine it. The experiences people bring with them to their return to education may sometimes get in the way of their further progress. The learning centre will do as much as it can, but cannot guarantee untrammelled success for all. Sometimes, a person's own resources cannot capitalise the benefits they have gained to bring them sustained achievement and the satisfaction accompanying it. Any sense of achievement Clare might have felt was qualified by not having the job that would

improve her family's economic situation permanently. This was a keenly felt loss.

Kate, more than any other winner, spoke about achievement, often as something that had eluded her. She was still scarred by her 11+ failure and saw the return to study as a way of repairing the damage to her self-esteem. Her first achievement was, like Emma's, actually entering the centre after many failed attempts. Her reluctance to enter continued for about six months:

I kept thinking, 'I'm not clever enough. You've not achieved,' so this barrier kept on getting to me (Kate).

Her next achievement was taking the basic skills test in numeracy. Being recognised as a supportive person and eventually being employed to help other students were significant steps in her journey to self-confidence, as were her four nominations and eventual success in winning the student of the year award. For Kate, this achievement was a quasi-religious experience:

So it took all this time and I felt so proud and it was there. I couldn't get to sleep that night. I woke up. I still couldn't get to sleep. Is that really my name on there? I just felt to myself, I've got something, this might sound a bit melancholy, I thought, when my time comes and I'm no longer on earth, my name is in that college (Kate).

Teachers disagree about whether there are spiritual benefits associated with a return to adult learning (Preston and Hammond, 2002; Preston and Hammond, 2003). However, Kate gives her award a significance elevating and positioning it beyond the here and now. Supporters of adult learners' awards were convinced they would enhance the winners' self-

esteem and confidence (Spear, 2009, 2011; Thompson, 2010; Stanistreet, 2012; Tuckett, 2012). Kate's experience was persuasive evidence that their belief was justified.

I always wanted to see my name on something. There was nothing of Kate Williams, nothing. All my life I hadn't achieved, even the egg and spoon race. I could have done better, but I was looking for my mum and dad and I tripped up. (Kate)

This was the saddest remark made by any of the participants and illustrated vividly the pain that lack of achievement can cause.

After all Kate had achieved, the end of her relationship with her partner was a huge loss that destroyed many of the gains she had made, suggesting that whatever benefits have been gained and whatever confidence has been built, traumatic events in learners' personal lives can demolish them.

Melanie achieved academically from the beginning. She moved quickly from the level one and two tests in literacy, numeracy and IT to the level three courses preparing her for university. She cherished her award because it showed people believed in her and valued what she was doing. Melanie hoped the award showed she was dedicated and would stand her in good stead when she applied to universities. She, more than any of the others, was affirmed by her achievements. Everything had been,

...worth it, because I've achieved... Even if nothing (else) happened, I've learned so much. (Melanie)

Sub-theme 7: family life

The meaning of the word, *family*, has expanded considerably in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, so it is difficult to construct a definition embracing all the possible varieties. Among the students in this research, all had *birth families*, the ones into which they had been born, and *conjugal families*, in which they, with one or more partners, had produced children. Among their birth and conjugal families, some had been reconstituted once or more. For some families, the *vertically extended family*, three generations including the participants, their parents and children, had significance. In others, the horizontally extended family embracing siblings, their partners and children, was important (Haralambos and Holban, 2008).

The students' reflections on the enriched family life they hoped their education might bring were often conducted against a background of family hardship and difficulty, some of it arising directly from their return to learning. All the students considered their birth families to have played an important part in their educational stories, frequently because their parents had passed on to them their assumption that education had no relevance to people like them. An important episode in some stories was breaking the cycle of family underachievement.

Emma believed that her parents had unintentionally made it difficult for her to succeed at school and was concerned that the benefits she had received from education might not be passed on to or enjoyed by her children or grandchildren. She intended no criticism of her parents, when she said they were wonderful people, but had never expected to gain anything from education. Her employment after leaving school was chosen for, rather than by, her. Without qualifications, she was directed to shop work, which she did not enjoy. After her marriage, employment opportunities were limited. Her return to learning was driven by a desire to acquire personal and economic independence and freedom. In the 1970s and 1980s, her mother had spent twelve years as an 'Auntie' in the children's home

next door to their house. In the early 1980s, staff members were given an ultimatum: do a college course and become a qualified social worker or leave. Emma's mother had no confidence she could succeed, so left her job and worked in unskilled, low paid jobs until she retired, always regretting her decision. Emma came to realise her parents were not against education, but overawed, intimidated and frightened by it. When she told them she was going to university:

They were so pleased for me but I could see behind the eyes. I think they had a lot of doubt. They were not sure of my capability, because nobody in my family had ever gone on to any college, to any university, to any course (Emma).

Her mother's lifelong sense of loss at missing her opportunity was an incentive, spurring Emma on during the times when the studying became difficult. She was determined to prove herself as a learner:

And I thought back to my mother. (It) was at the back of my mind. I was thinking, I don't want to give up like that (Emma).

When she graduated, her parents were there:

I could see their faces. They were so proud. I think my mother was wishing she'd done the same (Emma).

The cycle had been broken by Emma, but not by her daughters. After her own successful return to education, she was anxious that they, now all in their twenties, two married with children to supportive partners, should be able to share the social and cultural gains she had made. Her new found commitment to education had come too late to influence them

directly when they were younger. Their academic achievements at school had been modest and their prospects of fulfilling and well paid employment looked bleak:

Because of what I have gone through I want more for them. I know it will come. It will do (Emma).

She was concerned that now the Access courses at Loomstown and Moorsmills College had ended with no suitable basic literacy and numeracy courses to replace them, it would be difficult for her daughters to return to education:

They'll be going through what I've been through. Because of what I've been through, I want more for them (Emma).

She was also anxious her grandchildren should make more of their time at school than she and her daughters had done. Emma was not sure how she could enable them all to benefit, but was determined to find a way:

I know it will come. It will do (Emma).

Her own experience of family life had been enriched when she found a new and more congenial partner, which she attributed to her new way of looking at the world and the confidence she had gained on her long educational journey. Yet, the benefits she wanted for her children and grandchildren seemed far away.

Clare's family life had been disordered from birth.

My family life) was very difficult. That was one of the reasons that I went off

the rails (Clare).

She was certain this was the reason that, although very bright, she had had no interest in secondary school, was constantly truanting or in trouble, and had left with no qualifications. She gave some hints of the discomfort she felt in being different from others and having a blurred sense of identity:

When I was at primary school I didn't think about these things. You're much more resilient when you're a kid, aren't you? But when you go to high school and you start going to your friends' houses and compare how their lives are compared to yours, and people start asking you why are you called Brown, when your sister's called Green and your Mum's called Black. And it used to bug me and I said, 'I'm never having kids with a different name.' It was just driving me mad. (Clare).

She stayed true to her resolution. Although her three daughters had different fathers, they all shared Clare's family name. In educational terms, Clare made an important decision. Her youngest stepsister, a Catholic, had done well at the local Catholic school, much more academically successful than the neighbourhood state school. Clare decided to have all her children baptised in the Catholic faith to ensure they could attend the Catholic school, although she had no commitment to Catholic religious beliefs herself. It was a decision she never regretted and she was actively involved with the schools her daughters attended, something her own mother had never been.

At university, Clare found studying for a degree while looking after two small children and having a baby difficult for all of them. Her learner identity and parental identity were in conflict, a familiar experience to other participants in the research. The situation was

stressful:

I didn't really want to do my work. I wanted to be with my baby (Clare).

The children were being deprived of their mother's company and enduring financial hardship, but Clare hoped it would lead to more time together and more financial security, something still not achieved. It is still too early to say whether Clare's daughters will gain significantly from their education. Her eldest daughter had learning difficulties, but after leaving school became a carer with vulnerable young children. Clare is very proud of her. The two other daughters are still in full time education.

Kate's experience in her birth family had been different. Her 11+ failure had wounded her and left her with a damaged learner identity:

I used to think I'd let my mum and dad down for not being grammar school material, although they did love me. It was just I felt so left out (Kate).

Because of her own family responsibilities, she did not return to education for thirty years. Her marriage at twenty one ended quickly and she spent several years as a single parent before meeting Terry and having a second son with him. She would not return to education until she was sure her second child was settled at school, but when she returned in her late forties, her learning identity became very firm indeed. Her family's experience as a result of her involvement in education appeared to be everything she wanted. Her partner, Terry, her chaperone at her interview, sang her praises, emphasising the huge influence she had had on his and their son's educational histories and learner identities. Through her, he had enrolled on a Post Graduate Diploma in Education and taught IT at the learning centre briefly before the course was cut. Because of her influence, their son intended to become a

primary school teacher:

So Kate's legacy is that since she got back into education, I've got back into education and now our son wants to be a primary school teacher. So, Kate getting back into education brought the whole family back in. You see, that's the legacy Kate leaves behind her (Terry).

This certainly enhanced the family's life, but, sadly, when Terry left, the enrichment through education seemed to be lost. Her son failed all his A levels, which Kate attributed solely to his father's departure, as he had been expected to pass them. It seemed as if Kate's legacy had been shattered. However, her son slowly rebuilt his confidence, successfully completed a level three course in performing arts in 2016 and hoped to begin a degree course in the autumn of 2017.

Melanie's family was one in which people tended not to show their feelings. Although she enjoyed her studies and felt confident in herself, she was concerned other family members did not appreciate them. The award gave both her husband and mother the opportunity to show they valued her and what she was doing. She had told her husband of her fears:

At first I said, 'You don't support me doing this, do you?' He said, 'Yes, yes! Of course I do.' I said, 'No you don't because you don't give me any encouragement!' 'What do you want me to do?' I said, 'Encourage me!' So we did have a few fallouts about it, but he was really encouraging me. It was just I wanted more praise off him, more, 'Do it! Go for it!' (Melanie).

His pleasure in her success when she became adult student of the year and the chance for them to talk about it convinced her that he was in fact very supportive, but had been unable

to communicate that to her.

Her mother insisted on putting the trophy in her own display cabinet in case any of Melanie's children damaged it:

My mum is not big on praise, but when she wants your trophy in her display cabinet, that's major! (Melanie).

For Melanie, it seemed to help her enormously that her mother was so proud of her and enhanced her identity capital

Judith, the former head of centre, had insisted that for some learners, the benefits of a student's return to education would not come until the next generation. Melanie's daughter and son were examples of this. Married with a small son and inspired by her mother's success, Melanie's daughter returned to learning, studying part time for her GCSE in Maths and Science (she already had GCSE English) alongside a level three Access course for intending nurses and midwives. In 2015, at the age of 27 she began her midwifery degree studies at the university where her mother had applied unsuccessfully three years' earlier. This was a clear example of a family's life being enriched through a parent's return to education. In 2016, Melanie's youngest son, his diabetes now under control, began his university degree course in computer programming. Melanie's family had engaged with learning and given hope to people like Emma that it was still not too late for her own adult children to benefit.

The group award winners

Sub-theme 1: employment status and income

The group leader, **Marjorie** could not do paid work because of her long term depression.

Her two hours a week voluntary work with vulnerable adults brought her no financial gain.

The economic situation of **Violet** and **Shirley** remained the same. They continued their part time work with a mobile fruit and vegetable van and believed their membership of MAVIS brought the van more customers, a benefit to the owner rather than to them.

Table 5.2 presents the employment status of the individual adult students of the year before they began their courses at Loomstown and in 2016.

Table 5.2: The group winners and their changes in economic status				
Participant	Award	Employment, 2008	Employment, 2016	Economic Status
Marjorie	Group 2009	Sickness benefit	Sickness benefit, voluntary work	Unchanged
Shirley	Group 2009	Part time worker on mobile fruit and vegetable van.	Part time worker on mobile fruit and vegetable van; part time bar work.	Unchanged
Violet	Group 2009	Part time worker on mobile fruit and vegetable van	Part time worker on mobile fruit and vegetable van	Unchanged

The students who won the group award had not enrolled with any intention of gaining employment, but to share their mutual love of cookery and to develop their knowledge and skills. It is significant that there are no quotations about this topic, which none of them mentioned. They had been recruited through an outreach project in the local community, in which the healthy cooking course was used as an incentive to encourage learners in poorer areas to enrol on literacy and numeracy courses. They did not make a long-term commitment, although they stayed with the project longer than they had originally intended to take it to their neighbours in the community. Although they had enhanced marketable skill as cooks, none of them sought employment in catering after the project ended or has done so since.

In 2016, Moorsmills College changed its policy, so that only courses leading to employment or improved employment would be allowed to run at the Loomstown learning

centre. The healthy cooking course or similar courses not intended to improve students' employment chances would no longer be offered. If courses like this were to run in the future, they would have to include finding employment among their aims.

Sub-theme 2: a learner identity and learning

None of the three would have considered their experience in these terms, but they found the work very fulfilling. **Marjorie** went initially under duress from her friends, but found, '*I really enjoyed it,*' (Marjorie) and became the most committed member of the group. It enhanced her identity capital and gave her a sense of purpose.

Violet explained how the group's enthusiasm grew:

Our teacher started the course and basically a few of us got together and said, 'We actually like this course and want to pass on our knowledge to different people within the community,' so we came up with the idea of MAVIS, which was basically good home food, healthy options, all on a budget under five pounds. (Violet)

Violet's social capital was enhanced by the project, as was the social capital of those to whom she passed on her skills.

Shirley's enthusiasm for the enterprise was unreserved:

Before I started it, I couldn't cook. Now I cook everything. I used to have 'manky' (poor quality) meals, but now I don't touch them. I do everything fresh, fresh fruit, fresh veg, fresh. (Shirley).

The learning experience gave Shirley a new passion and a love of learning to cook.

Sub-theme 3: community involvement

The MAVIS group provided a good example of the way in which a community can be enriched by voluntary work, although it also highlighted the dangers of not keeping firm control of a project involving adults who need a lot of responsible support. The course recruited from among friendship groups and went into the community to hold its lessons. The MAVIS group comprised the first class. Those who enrolled recruited their friends, neighbours and acquaintances and passed on what they had learned. It was believed being taught by friends and neighbours would make courses more attractive to reluctant learners. The course was designed to show students how to eat economically and more healthily by buying and preparing fresh food

More people got interested in it and that led to more funding and also more interest in what we were doing and more people started coming 'cos we were getting more publicity. (Violet)

The social benefits for the MAVIS members and the community were considerable when the project was flourishing, because they became involved with new groups and networks:

It just opened new doors to us. More people got interested in it and that led to more funding and more interest in what we were doing. More people started coming 'cos we were getting more publicity... (Violet)

The scope of the work began to widen.

We started cooking for mentally handicapped people. That was really good

because that opened doors for them as well to get out of the house and meet different people... We got to know people in the College, the leader of the housing trust, councillors. We've got this reputation now of winning awards
(Violet).

In achieving these things, the members were amassing social capital (Preston and Hammond (2003). Having been previously isolated from each other and from other people in the wider community, they were able to forge friendships they hoped would endure. They were enabled to meet and work with others both similar to and different from themselves. They worked together with the students they were teaching and with the more powerful members of society who became interested in and involved with what seemed to be a very successful project. They had an opportunity to become more politically aware as they worked in networks extending beyond social and geographical boundaries they would not otherwise have crossed. In the early stages the MAVIS group members all gained from improved social networks, the reciprocities they generated and their value in achieving shared goals (Field, 2005), which led to community development, social inclusion and opportunities to operate together for mutual advantage. It gave them power, not only over other people, but also to work with other people towards a common aim. By cascading to others in the community what they had learned, they were furthering the goal of the centre to include more of the-hard-to-reach within its learning community.

The teacher may have extended that reach too far when she began to move the group away from the centre's influence. Although the project seemed to be a striking example of a 'virtuous circle' in which more and more members of the community shared the benefits of learning (Tett and MacLachlan, 2007), it started to see itself as independent of the centre. The teacher went on sick leave and Marjorie began to think the centre had had too much publicity on the back of the group's success:

MAVIS used to be put side by side with college, like, they're that cooking group from the college, aren't they? And I said, 'Well, we're not actually with the college because we're actually a group on our own. (Marjorie)

The group members refused to become learning ambassadors, which was ironic, as they were the students who had been most successful in reaching those who would otherwise not have enrolled at the centre.

I don't think the Learning Ambassadors is for me. They have you going out on the streets all the time, doing things for the college, and if you've not got this commitment to the college, you've not got the time to go on the streets when you're busy yourself. (Marjorie)

While the individual winners' loyalty was to the learning centre and their teachers, the group winners' loyalty was to their group. This may have been because the group did most of its work away from the centre, although most members attended other courses there. When their teacher resigned, the group, described by Judith as, 'vulnerable,' struggled. It refused to have a teacher in charge and became a separate organisation. According to Judith,

They were nowhere near ready, so they decided to run before they could walk
(Judith)

They encountered various administrative problems and failed to meet the targets,

...so it kind of spiralled downwards from there. We've offered several times to

rescue them, but they won't let us. They see it as interference. (Judith)

The group enjoyed benefiting the community, but did not appreciate that the conferring of community benefits is a two way process. The community, particularly through the support of the learning centre, had something it could give to the group to make its work effective and enduring, but the group did not want it. There had certainly been benefits, but their effects were lost when the group decided to become independent. While the group stayed with the centre, it experienced many benefits. It ended untidily, which was a loss, although that did not eradicate the benefits it had already enjoyed.

Sub-theme 4: The fourth benefit: level of confidence

The project played a prominent part in giving the MAVIS group members confidence in themselves. **Violet** spoke for herself and Shirley when she said,

I think it's definitely made us more confident. It's just opened opportunities really, because we got to know people in the College, the leader of the housing trust, councillors. It's given us opportunities..., We are trusted members of the community. (Violet).

Marjorie recalled Judith telling the audience at the awards evening about her (Marjorie's) difficulties, some of which had been very traumatic, earlier in her life.

I wasn't expecting her to read that out, but when she actually did read it out, the bits that were about me, I thought, I overcame that! (Marjorie)

She saw it as a sign of her increased confidence that she could look back on some of the bad things in her life without embarrassment and recognise the improvements, particularly

in her mental health, but with pride in how far she had travelled since. She attributed this to the effect the group's project had had on her. However, the group's confidence grew beyond what was beneficial and gave it a trust in its organisational abilities that was misplaced. This meant that without effective leadership it was unable to continue. The further benefits it might have brought to the community were lost.

Sub-theme 5: The fifth benefit: management of health and well-being

All three members of the group had made gains in in their physical and mental health during their time with the group. **Marjorie** had been suffering from severe depression, had had serious issues with drug and alcohol abuse and had frequently stayed in bed all day as a result of her depression before she had been persuaded by Shirley to attend the initial course. She enrolled successfully for a food hygiene certificate. While there were occasions when her problems with drug and alcohol abuse re-emerged, they became gradually fewer and occurred at longer intervals. She began to take more control of her life while the project maintained its original form.

Both Violet and Shirley were suffering from depression before they enrolled on the first course and attributed their improved condition to participating in it:

It helped me with my depression as well, getting over what's been wrong with me (Violet).

For Shirley, the effects were even more surprising and possibly the most positive of the benefits gained among all the seven participants. The course inspired her to change her family's eating habits. She lost four stone and had maintained her new weight when interviewed four years later. The project had made her and her children physically much healthier:

I never cooked anything before, whereas now I cook everything from the start. And my kids, especially my youngest, she wants me to get new potatoes and broccoli and stuff like that, whereas before she never used to touch broccoli. I mean, she wants to eat fresh all the time. If it weren't for (the healthy eating lessons, I'd still be a ten ton Tessie. I've lost so much weight (Shirley).

She too had suffered from depression, but believed the course had largely 'cured' her of it:

She is very proud of what it's done for her and she has liked talking about it, because it's changed her life immensely, even her home life and things like that... the healthy side of it (Violet).

In the interview, Violet sometimes spoke for Shirley and saw herself as her minder. Judith told me Shirley could be unsure of herself at times and needed Violet's support.

The changes for the better in the health of some members of the MAVIS group were remarkable. However, it was ironic that both the teacher, and Iris, another group member, had left because of ill health, including stress, although it would be hard to establish what part, if any, group membership had played in their illnesses.

Sub-theme 6: level of achievement

Marjorie valued the project and what she had gained from it, but also the award:

The award was good. For me personally, it gave me pride in what I'd done, being awarded for something I hadn't set out to be awarded for. It was brilliant. It gave me a confidence boost (Marjorie).

Violet also valued both her learning experience and the award:

The award changed our lives. It gave us more confidence and it got us places within the community as well with extra funding and things like that. It was a door opener and to have that award was amazing (Violet).

After the original MAVIS group folded in 2011, Marjorie continued its work voluntarily in weekly meetings with two new members, cooking for three vulnerable adults in a local church hall and was still doing it three years later, but the enterprise was a shadow of what had preceded it.

Sub-theme 7: family life

The only identifiable enrichment of family life, but a remarkable one, among the MAVIS members was the change of cooking and eating habits in Shirley's family.

I threw the chip pan out. We do eat healthily now. I never cooked anything before, whereas now I cook everything from the start. And my kids, especially my youngest, like she wants me to get new potatoes and broccoli and stuff like that, whereas before she never used to touch broccoli. I mean, she wants to eat fresh all the time. (Shirley)

This benefit has endured. In one family at least the project more than justified itself.

Neither of the other group members mentioned any benefits or losses to their children.

Conclusion

This chapter began with brief biographies of the seven participants to contextualise the seven themes investigated using theme analysis, used to identify the benefits sought and gained by the award winners in their return to learning as adults and the losses they had experienced. The seven subthemes had been identified by their prominence in the students' interviews and the frequency with which the students talked about them. Three of the themes could have been reduced to one: acquiring a learner identity and a love of learning; building confidence and self-esteem; being affirmed by achievement. All of them related to the positive effect of becoming a returning learner. However, all were separately identifiable in the participants' interviews. Furthermore, while the themes emerged from the data, they were also created by me as the researcher in the deep investigation of the data and the search for links (Braun and Clark, 2006). This was another moment in the research, when I could draw on the auto/biographical narrative approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009). In analysing the participants' interview transcripts, I recognised the three phases in my own experience as a lifetime adult learner: the initial struggle to convince myself I was a legitimate learner; the slow building of self-confidence, mainly through the encouragement of others who had faith in me; and the reassurance and affirmation that accompanied success. Each stage begins the process again and, if things go well, gradually works through the three phases of gaining self-belief. Any failures are serious setbacks and self-belief can be reconstructed only gradually.

Separating the two sets of winners highlighted the differences between them. All the individual winners had a long term aim of reaching higher education and finding better paid and more prestigious work. The similarity is not surprising as it was a characteristic favoured by the judges when selecting individual award winners. However, they shared other characteristics. All of them wanted their children to benefit from education. Three of

the four winners had been proactive in trying to ensure this happened. All felt a strong loyalty and sense of gratitude to the learning centre that had supported them.

Two individual award winners had gained university degrees and one of them was employed within her chosen field. A third had gained employment in her chosen area, but had been prevented by domestic circumstances from enrolling on a foundation degree. A fourth had made good progress towards entering university but had been prevented by domestic circumstances from continuing her studies. The four histories all contained evidence that responsibilities as the main carers for their children had constrained, delayed or interrupted students' studies, sometimes more than once. The students' social class and gender seemed to have determined their own and others' expectations of them in their gendered maternal rôle.

The group award winners' aim was short term: to foster their shared love of cooking. They seemed to have no particular concerns about what their children might gain from education. Their loyalty was to the group and their teacher rather than to the learning centre. They gained genuine benefits from their experience, although their story highlighted the need for careful monitoring of vulnerable adults' courses and ensuring their interests are respected and protected.

While different learners derived different benefits from their studies, some of them immediate and some likely to appear in the future, all seemed to have derived sufficient benefit to justify the capital investment in the programme. This conclusion acknowledges that adult returners to education may be embarking on a long journey with several obstacles ahead, many of them domestic and difficult to anticipate, what Judith called, 'life's disasters'. Although employment or improved employment, which *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001) and most learners saw as the major benefit of a return to learning, was not

achieved by most of the learners, it did not diminish the worth of the other gains they made. Benefits such as increased self-belief and confidence or improved mental and physical health were not seen as soft benefits, but rather as very valuable.

In 2016, because of new funding arrangements, Moorsmills College made it a condition that any courses it offered anywhere should have a vocational purpose, either leading to or improving proficiency in employment. The other forms of learning that many adults pursued as interests and hobbies (for example, painting, flower arranging, embroidery, creative writing groups, conversational modern languages, all of which had been offered at various times) would no longer be available. The benefit of obtaining or gaining better employment would become paramount. Other learning interests would have to be pursued and funded elsewhere.

The next chapter presents the emergent conceptual model, BLARE, the research's contribution to new knowledge, which is used to analyse the investment of the three forms of capital to remove the barriers learners often face in their return to learning.

CHAPTER SIX

AN EMERGENT CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Introduction

‘Conceptual models are qualitative models that help highlight important connections in real world systems and processes’ (Science Education Resource Centre, Carleton College, 2006). A model is intended to enable the researcher who uses it to learn something new about the systems it represents (Ford, 2006).

This chapter presents a conceptual model which emerged from the research. It has been named **BLARE**, an acronym for **B**enefits and **L**osses for **A**dult **R**eturners to **E**ducation, which is its subject. Theme analysis generated and organised the data drawn directly from the participants’ reflections on their learning experiences. The conceptual model brings together literature, policy and practice. It comprises three capitals drawn from the literature (Schuller, 2004) and three barriers identified in research (Cross, 1981). The three forms of capital - identity capital, human capital and social capital – were brought to, applied and accumulated during the learning process. The three types of barrier to learning - dispositional, situational and institutional – were confronted by many adult students in their return to education. The model represents the interaction of the capitals and barriers during the learning journey. Benefits or losses are the outcomes of the interaction (Figure 6.1a). It is hoped that foregrounding the effect of the forms of capital on the barriers and the forms of capital generated by the interaction will prove useful to other researchers examining or engaged in the experience of adult returners to learning. The model uses the group’s experiences to highlight both helpful and unsupportive practice among those organising, teaching and supporting adult returners to learning.

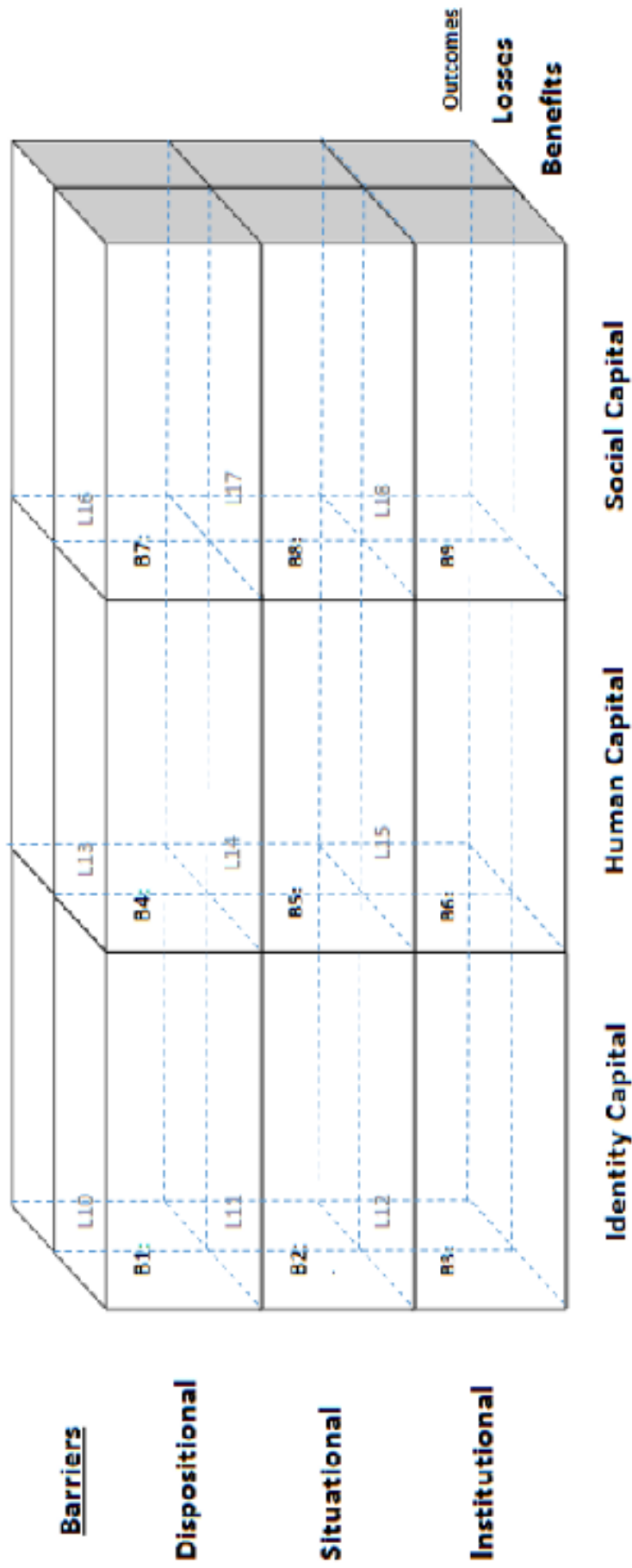


Figure 6.1a: BLARE: a model of the application of the forms of capital to dismantling the barriers to learning and the outcomes of benefit or loss.

The Forms of Capital

BLARE examines and analyses the experiences of non-traditional adult learners returning to education. It indicates how the benefits might be achieved; and how the losses might be prevented, negotiated or remedied. The aim is to encompass the whole experience beginning with initial consideration of a return to learning and ending with employment or unemployment after the learning experience has been completed.

Table 6.1a: The application of the forms of capital to dismantling the barriers to learning and the positive outcomes

<u>Barriers</u>	The Forms of Capital: Benefits		
	Identity Capital	Human Capital	Social Capital
Dispositional	Attractiveness B1: <i>Learner develops an attraction to learning and embraces learner identity.</i>	Opportunities B4: <i>Learner acquires new knowledge and skills, becomes more employable and increases opportunities.</i>	Showcasing B7: <i>Learner gains confidence to showcase knowledge & skills, developing willingness to be a member of the learning community.</i>
Situational	Integration B2: <i>Learner is able to integrate learner identity into other identities.</i>	Employability B5: <i>Learner develops knowledge and skills and recognises employability is realistic target.</i>	Community B8: <i>Learner has opportunity to showcase knowledge and skills, from which the community benefits and offers employment opportunities.</i>
Institutional	Appropriateness B3: <i>Learner is able to develop a learner identity on appropriate courses in appropriate circumstances.</i>	Completion B6: <i>Learner successfully completes course; increased knowledge and skills recognised by qualification.</i>	Success, Security, Self-respect B9: <i>Learner gains from network membership to find appropriate employment and community gains from her contribution.</i>

The eighteen cells in the model in Figure 6.1a and Figure 6.2 have been populated by drawing on the students' stories of benefits and losses. Each one represents a unique intersection of a form of capital's influence on and response to a type of barrier and an ensuing positive or negative outcome.

Table 6.1 represents the positive outcomes. Each cell is analysed in detail in the commentary that follows. If one follows a path from top to bottom and from left to right through the three forms of identity capital it is possible to trace a developmental progression for the learners, which begins in Cell B1, *Attractiveness*, and reaches the desired destination in Cell B9, *Success, Security and Self-Respect*. In the *identity capital* column, the learner develops an attraction to learning and embraces a learner identity which leads to an integration of the learner identity with other competing identities, thus enabling the learner to develop a learner identity on appropriate courses in appropriate circumstances. In the *human capital* column, the learner begins to accumulate the knowledge and skills that will increase the chances of employment, which enables her to see employment as a realistic possibility and the newly acquired confidence is reinforced by a recognised qualification. In the *social capital* column, the learner draws on her confidence to make others aware of her newly acquired skills and knowledge, which leads to opportunities to demonstrate them in the community as a result of which offers of employment are made and the learner is able to choose the one that seems most suitable and contribute both socially and economically to the community and its well-being.

A path similar to the one followed in Table 6.1 can be followed in Table 6.2. In the *identity capital* column, some learners are so intimidated and lacking in confidence that they never even begin a course of study. Some who do begin find their personal circumstances so difficult that they soon give up. Others, realising their personal and employment needs are not being met by their chosen course walk away. In the *human capital* column, some learners, believing they are beyond help, leave the course. Others, unable to feel part of the learning community, depart, while members of a third group, finding the knowledge and skills they are accumulating are not going to help them achieve their ambitions or are worth less than they hoped, do not persevere. In the *social capital* column, a learner who

feels isolated and believes she will not be given a chance to show her capabilities will decide the course is not for her. Another, concluding that the support she needs to find employment is not available, will give up. Finally, a learner who successfully completes the course and gains the qualification, but does not find appropriate employment will be left feeling frustrated, embittered and badly let down.

Table 6.2: The failure to apply, or the misapplication of, the forms of capital to dismantling the barriers to learning and the negative outcomes

<u>Barriers</u>	The Forms of Capital: Losses		
	Identity Capital	Human Capital	Social Capital
Dispositional	Non-participation L10: <i>Learner does not enrol on course.</i>	Despair L13: <i>Learner leaves feeling beyond help</i>	Isolation L16: <i>Learner leaves, feeling isolated, having nowhere to showcase knowledge & skills.</i>
Situational	Withdrawal L11: <i>Learner finds personal circumstances are too difficult, so gives up.</i>	Marginalisation L14: <i>Learner leaves feeling out of place in learning community</i>	Disadvantage L17: <i>Learner leaves feeling unsupported in effort to find openings.</i>
Institutional	Rejection L12: <i>Learner gives up believing her needs are not being met.</i>	Inadequacy L15: <i>Learner finds her knowledge and skills are inappropriate or worth less than hoped.</i>	Disappointment, Desperation, Disillusion. L18: <i>Learner does not find work when course ends, so leaves in frustration, disillusion & despair.</i>

The model's strength is that it provides a systematic way of analysing closely the effects of the intersections of capitals and barriers on outcomes of benefit or loss. It has proved particularly helpful in making sense of the experiences of the participants in this research and could offer a way for other practitioners to map these phenomena in their students' learning process.

Before discussing the three dimensional model in detail, it is important to explain the part

played by economic capital, which does not appear in the model. It is not included because, although most of the research participants increased their capital in three of its forms - identity, human and social - some did not find employment after their course had finished, so gained no economic capital at all, at least in the short term. It is argued that those who found employment did so by investing their social capital acquired during the course or later through the social networks they were able to join, usually through voluntary work, utilising the human capital they had accrued during their learning experience.

IDENTITY CAPITAL

Identity capital is the value people can derive from their view of themselves in late modern societies (Schuller, 2004; Coté, 2005; Lewis, 2016). It is appropriate to apply it to returning adult learners because, alongside *family* and *occupation*, *education* or *learning*, it makes a major contribution to the way people form an understanding of themselves: who they are and how comfortable they feel with that understanding. This thesis draws on the capitals framework of Schuller (2004), so follows him in using the term, *identity capital*, in a more restricted sense than Coté, confining it to: ‘intangible assets, that is, ego strengths such as an internal locus of control, self-esteem, sense of purpose in life, ability to self-actualise, and critical thinking abilities’ (Coté and Levene, 2002, p. 144). Identity capital is invested in a person’s self-image and outlook on life.

IDENTITY CAPITAL AND BARRIERS - BENEFITS

B1: Attractiveness

Identity capital x Dispositional barriers x Benefits

The application of identity capital to the dispositional barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner develops an attraction to learning and embraces a learner identity.

The label of each cell in the model highlights the characteristic or quality being fostered in a student during the learning journey. In this cell, it is the nurturing of positive feelings towards the learning centre, whose important first task is to make itself attractive to potential learners. Theme analysis highlighted in sub-theme 2, *learner identity and learning*, its importance for the research participants. A successful return to learning will include developing and investing in a sense of purpose, self-confidence, learner identity and a belief that successful learning is possible. By giving non-traditional learners positive learning experiences, the teachers remove the dispositional barrier to learning, possibly caused by negative experiences earlier in life, and nurture a commitment to the learning centre. Instilling faith in the institution builds a firm foundation for the learners' belief and confidence that they can cope with the learning challenges ahead.

Some learners hesitate for weeks before feeling able to enter a further education centre. For them, the opportunity to meet other learners and realise they are very similar to them represents a major breakthrough in both further and higher education. To realise that similar people have become successful learners is a major step forward.

The institutions fostering opportunities for prospective learners to meet, be befriended and encouraged by established learners are supporting returning learners in strengthening their determination to dismantle the dispositional barriers to learning. Some returning learners, through successful adult experiences in employment, already have a positive disposition, a strong belief they can develop the characteristics of a successful learner and cope with the studies ahead. They are valuable members of learning groups and, used wisely in supporting roles by teachers, can do much to build the confidence of their fellow learners.

The centre creating an ethos in which a student supporting other students is highly valued helps to spread self-confidence across the whole group. Encouraging mutual support develops a climate in which nurturing one another's confidence is accepted as normal and natural and shows learners that learning can be supportive, rather than competitive.

A third group of returners may already have confidence in its ability to handle the studies, but, possibly based on past experience, doubts its ability to persevere. Perseverance is an important component of a positive learner identity, yet difficult to acquire for some. Such learners will benefit if the learning centre gives them a positive experience, encouraging good and consistent learning habits for the benefits they bring alongside learners' other identities as parents, part time workers and community members. The learning centre operating a genuinely supportive personal tutor system can do much to help reluctant learners develop a positive approach. . It can develop flexible systems to help learners coping with competing roles and responsibilities to organise their lives to manage and meet the demands of learning and coursework.

Courses provided free are attractive and encourage people without much money to enrol. Financial help or grants make participation more manageable, although in the bleak economic climate of the early twenty first century, such support is unlikely.

B2: Integration

Identity capital x Situational barriers x Benefits

The application of identity capital to the situational barriers to learning has a beneficial outcome and the learner is able to integrate her learner identity with other identities.

This is an example of how the benefits of one cell (B1) can permeate another (B2). The

learning centre with arrangements flexible enough to help learners integrate the competing rôles of partner, parent, homemaker and part time worker will help them to persevere with their studies. Similarly, a centre offering advice and support for learners experiencing domestic or financial difficulties will help them to manage the problem, integrate them into the learning community and bind them to it as a source of concerned support. That support may well enable learners to continue a course they might otherwise leave. Larger centres can employ designated professional counsellors and social workers, but in the smaller centres this is not possible. Often counselling is done by teachers, the most important influences on whether or not a learner perseveres (McGivney, 2004). In smaller centres, it is seen as an informal, optional task for teachers and not officially recognised as part of their job. It would help teachers and learners if this part of the work could be recognised and become part of a teacher's job description. All the services designed to integrate learners into the learning community are meeting the concerns of research participants articulated in the theme analysis sub-theme 3, *Community involvement*.

When learners have to suspend their studies, the centre can help to prevent the loss becoming permanent. When leavers are assured they can return once their personal situation allows it, they can hold on to their learner identity, continue to integrate it into their other identities and construct their departure from the course as a break, not an ending, making a return to learning easier and more likely when circumstances allow.

B3: Appropriateness

Identity capital x Situational barriers x Benefits

The application of identity capital to the institutional barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner is able to enrol on appropriate courses in appropriate circumstances.

This cell integrates most closely with sub-themes 2, 4 and 6, since appropriate courses will give students a secure leaning identity, a high level of confidence and a strong possibility of success. A learner will feel most at home if she finds the courses offered appropriate to her needs, abilities and stage in the learning journey. The institution has the power to remove many of the barriers experienced by learners that threaten their retention on courses. If a centre is within two miles of those living in deprived areas and targeted as potential learners, they are far more likely to enrol. Similarly, if there is a crèche and the centre runs courses at times that synchronise with requirements to take small children to and from school, parents of young children are more likely to be attracted. (Cross, 1981; Bariso, 2008).

It is very helpful when an institution supports non-traditional learners in developing a positive learner identity. It can construct the concept of being a learner in a different way by making the learning community and experience as different as possible in a positive sense from the experience of school. If there is a predominantly working class learner cohort, learners can be made to feel at ease by fostering a working class culture and ethos, where being teachers or learners and members of the working class are not seen as mutually exclusive identities, and where nobody is made to feel inferior to anybody else. Working class teachers may well present themselves as respectable members of the working class, acting as rôle models to students and showing what working class people can achieve.

Enrichment courses designed to persuade newly returned learners that learning can be enjoyable and relevant can consolidate a learner's identity. Their practical application and relevance to learners' lives can foster a love of learning and the motivation to learn, particularly if the enrichment courses are timed to precede or run alongside Access courses. Courses seen as relevant to learners' own situations can foster the critical thinking abilities

included among the intangible benefits of a positive learning identity (Coté and Levene, 2002), enabling learners to look with more discernment at social structures such as the family and women's social rôles. If a learning centre establishes an accreditation system recognising all the courses new learners take, the learners can begin to accumulate course credits, tangible symbols of their increasing identity capital, building a sense of achievement and success.

A module training learners to become recruitment officers for the centre and providing appropriate opportunities to do voluntary vocational work consolidates learner identities, as well as loyalty and commitment to the learning centre. Voluntary work helps learners discover those areas they find congenial and helps them to access networks to assist them when they search for eventual employment, rather in the way parents in premodern societies could access networks for their children to help them find employment and status in their own communities (Coté, 2005). Modules of this type are not compulsory, but the potential outcomes are so valuable that it would be worthwhile devoting time to persuading learners of their worth.

Awards and nominations for learners who make outstanding progress or effort are valued by learners. Winners or nominees for awards experience a huge increase in confidence and a greatly enhanced learner identity. The awards mean good students are recognised, not only by teachers and fellow students, but also by members of the wider community. Identity capital comes in part from how a person is seen by others. Affirmation by the community can only strengthen it (Schuller, 2004).

IDENTITY CAPITAL AND BARRIERS - LOSSES

L10: Non-participation

Identity capital x Dispositional barriers x losses

The failure to invest in identity capital to dismantle the dispositional barriers to learning has a negative outcome and the learner does not enrol on course.

An outcome of loss is, as the word suggests, the absence of, or inability to recognise, benefits. This loss relates to a failure to give a potential learner a learner identity, a feeling she can belong in the leaning community and develop the confidence to succeed, which relates to sub-themes 2, 3, 4, and 6. There are ways of making learning more appealing. If a potential member of the learning centre community does not overcome her reluctance or hesitation to enrol, she can never begin to participate. The dispositional barriers are reinforced during the enrolment process if it is done in an impersonal and unwelcoming way. It will not achieve its purpose if it does not provide accurate oral and written information about the content of the courses and the qualification routes to which they are linked; the times and places at which they are available; and the amount and type of work they will require.

There are several aspects of the enrolment process that may dissuade people from enrolling. It is unhelpful if interviews are rushed or the needs of the institution are put before those of the prospective learner by, for example, trying to fit the enquirer into the courses available or the ones with vacancies, rather than seeking courses matching the enquirer's ability, aptitude and educational history. Ideally, there will be taster courses available to help those unsure about which route to follow. Not giving enquirers enough information, space and time to make decisions is unlikely to provide a foundation solid enough to build on.

L11: Withdrawal

Identity capital x Situational barriers x losses

The failure to invest in identity capital to dismantle the situational barriers to

learning and the losses incurred has a negative outcome and the learner finds personal circumstances are too difficult, so gives up.

If a learner withdraws early in a course, it is likely she will not return and the damage to her learning identity could be permanent. Situational barriers created by an individual's personal circumstances and acknowledged by the research participants in sub-theme 7, *family Life*, can be many and varied. For some, their other identities as partner, parent, homemaker and part time worker are onerous burdens. For others, the need to continue working to support the family budget or to care for a sick relative makes continued learning impossible. Disapproval by a partner can bring added pressure and lead to withdrawal. Sometimes, the situational barrier is too solid to remove. If a centre has no support systems in place to help those in difficult situations, a learner's departure becomes far more likely

If advertised courses do not run or less suitable ones are put in their place, learners may become disheartened and leave as their level of confidence (sub-theme 4) will fall. If no attempt is made to support learners confronting difficulties in their personal lives, the learners may be lost. On courses targeting learners in deprived areas, personal crises may be many and frequent. Without the emotional and practical support from individuals in the learning centres, particularly the smaller centres, learners with personal, financial and family problems will leave. If a learner withdraws, the centre will want to be sure the departure was unavoidable and the door left open for a return.

L12: Rejection

Identity capital x Institutional barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in identity capital to dismantle the institutional barriers to learning has a negative outcome and the learner gives up disappointed, believing she

is not really a learner and will never become one.

A feeling of rejection makes it unlikely a learner can sustain her learner identity. If a centre is not proactive in confronting all the barriers learners might encounter - some of which it has the power to dismantle or help students to negotiate - it will find it difficult to retain students. If they leave, any sense of a learner identity may be badly damaged or disappear. Learners are likely to have their initial sense of themselves as failures incapable of ever succeeding reinforced, making it unlikely they will attempt to return. This could seriously affect their life chances and those of their children. A damaged learning identity (sub-theme 2) can have long term effects on a family (sub-theme 7).

One of the unwanted consequences of trying to accommodate the needs of a particular group, such as parents of young children, is that the arrangements may create barriers for some other groups, those with part time jobs, for example, who want to improve their skills in the hope of better employment. It is a reminder that, '*benefits* is an inherently value laden term' (Schuller, 2004, p. 7). A benefit for one may be a loss for another. It is wise to check the possible benefits and losses before making policy decisions.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Human capital comprises, 'the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals that enable them to function effectively in economic and social life' (Schuller, 2004, p. 14; Schultz, 1961). To this should be added the qualifications that certify they have the knowledge and skills, and the good health equipping them to function effectively, socially and economically.

HUMAN CAPITAL and BARRIERS - BENEFITS

B4: Opportunities

Human capital x Dispositional barriers x Losses

The application of human capital to the dispositional barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner acquires new knowledge and skills, becomes more employable and has more opportunities.

Ideally, learning, new knowledge and skills will bring new opportunities. *Improved employment status and income* (sub-theme 1) become more likely when learners begin to acquire and develop marketable skills. A centre can take active steps to ensure the human capital a learner acquires gives her the opportunity to become a contributor to the community's financial health rather than being a burden on it. The learner's task is to invest in nurturing personal qualities of motivation, resilience and perseverance. For some, if they are to be encouraged at all, it will be only at the learning centre. An ideal learning centre would be sensitive to the moods and needs of its learners and build on the learner identities they have established, ensuring the learning process itself is seen as enjoyable, purposeful and profitable in every sense. The learners come to see themselves as people who can take pleasure in both learning and achievement. They can be encouraged to value learning, skills and knowledge, both for their own sake and for their potential application in the world of employment, where they can be converted into the economic capital that comes from an income higher and more secure than people have had in the past. Although the individual person has to find the motivation and will to persevere for herself, she can be supported in the process of acquiring and strengthening it. A learning centre fosters a sense of community, so that learners support one another, not only as learners (identity capital), but as effective ones (human capital). By ensuring the courses are accredited and lead to worthwhile qualifications, the centre ensures learners are aware the qualifications themselves are valued by wider society, so can be valued by them. As with identity

capital, human capital is worth most when valued by the learners and when the valuation is shared and affirmed by the people around them and in the wider society. It will sustain them on their learning journey, which could be a long one. It will strengthen their determination to persevere and make it much more likely they will reach their destination.

B5: Employability

Human capital x Situational Barriers x Benefits

The application of human capital to the situational barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the: learner develops knowledge and skills and recognises employability has become a realistic target.

In an ideal situation, a centre encourages and enables learners to follow courses appropriate to their learning stage, developing their knowledge, skills and talents and giving them secure employment in due course. The Access courses are intended to address the situational barriers to accruing human capital. If they are accompanied by appropriate enrichment courses, they can give learners an insight into some realistic employment opportunities and awareness of the human capital most valuable for them to acquire. The opportunity to be taught critical literacy skills is most useful, as those skills are more effective and appropriate for employment. It is important that courses can lead to employment, however indirectly. The centre setting up partnerships with private industry and public sector organisations provides learners with opportunities to do voluntary work and increases their chance of finding suitable and fulfilling employment in their locality. As with all the human capital interactions, successful outcomes while meeting other learner needs, will make *improved employment status and income* (sub-theme 1) more likely.

B6: Completion

Human capital x Institutional barrier x Benefits

The application of human capital to the institutional barrier comprising a lack of qualifications has a positive outcome when the learner successfully completes a course and her increased knowledge and skills are recognised by a qualification.

Qualifications are an important constituent of human capital and enhance the likelihood of better *employment status and income* (sub-theme 1). When the government sets up Access courses, it removes one institutional barrier, a lack of qualifications, impeding the progress of those who have previously lacked basic skills. Successful completion also increases a learner's sense of well-being, contributing to good health, another component of human capital. Level two courses offer an alternative to GCSE English and Maths passes at Grade C or better. The institutional barrier preventing those without the GCSE passes from progressing any further towards occupations for which they appear to have the aptitude is removed. Level three Access courses provide an equivalent to A levels, enabling those without traditional qualifications who could benefit from a university education to have one (Robbins, 1963). The endorsement and recognition of the qualifications by government, educators and employers is essential to the enterprise's success. Society at large benefits from the utilisation in the work place of the human capital of non-traditional learners and their contribution to the state's income through income tax and national insurance. The learners benefit too by enjoying the higher standard of living which comes with increased human capital: the higher income from better paid work; and the increased identity capital accrued from the status and income attached to their position in the workforce. The government makes a significant investment of economic capital in the project, believing the investment will yield a healthy return.

HUMAN CAPITAL and BARRIERS – LOSSES

L13: Despair

Human capital x Dispositional barrier x Losses

The failure to invest in human capital to dismantle the dispositional barriers to learning incurs loss and the learner leaves feeling unable to learn and beyond help, making it unlikely she will return.

If learners are not convinced the courses available will offer sufficient or appropriate knowledge or skills for what they need or if they find the work too hard, they will be unlikely to stay. If a learning centre does not provide opportunities for learners to get some experience of different kinds of employment alongside their basic skills courses, the learners may feel rudderless and lose motivation. Similarly, if the learning centre makes no attempt to offer learners a different kind of learning experience from those they have known before, the learners may find it difficult to respond with enthusiasm. If there are no well-chosen enrichment courses, learners may not get the taste for learning that would motivate them, so become more likely to fall away.

Individuals with the ability to increase their human capital, but without the determination or good habits to do so are not uncommon in basic skills Access courses. For some, it was what led to their lack of success in their first encounter with learning at school. Without a considerable amount of support and encouragement to develop these qualities, particularly at the beginning, they will fall by the wayside. Those who leave through feelings of despair and a conviction they are beyond help are unlikely to return,

L14: Marginalisation

Human capital x Situational barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in human capital to dismantle the situational barriers to learning

has a negative outcome and the learner leaves disillusioned, believing the centre is not a place where she belongs or will flourish.

When the courses offered are not fit for purpose, they do not improve learners' chances of eventually gaining employment. If the basic skills courses do not lead to an improvement in literacy and numeracy skills, they reinforce a situational barrier that stands in the way of further progress. Learners remain on the margins of social and occupational life. Teaching functional literacy skills does not equip people for the demands of modern society or employment. If those teaching on the basic skills courses, particularly numeracy, are not properly trained to do so, the learners are less likely to be engaged or to succeed.

If gaining permanent, well paid employment is not achievable for most learners embarking on basic skills courses, particularly when employment has been the major reason for encouraging a return to learning, it results in a major loss and a severe blow to learner-confidence. Many learners make significant sacrifices to take the courses. Some manage on considerably less money and invest a significant amount of time while studying. Learners and their families sacrifice income and some pleasures of family life to enable the learner to study. When the sacrifices and investment yield no financial return or suitable employment, a learner and her family remain marginalised and no better off, so the whole exercise can seem to have been a heart-breaking waste of time.

L15: Inadequacy

Human capital x Institutional Barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in human capital or to invest it inappropriately to dismantle the institutional barriers to learning and the negative outcomes means the learner finds her knowledge and skills are inappropriate or worth less than hoped.

It is a major setback for learners to discover the courses set up by educational institutions and taken by them have not made them employable because they do not equip them with sufficient or necessary skills. This undermines their faith in the system in which they have put their trust; in the course which they have completed successfully; and in themselves. They feel inadequate.

For those aspiring to higher education, institutional barriers are not removed simply by government edict. The educational establishment is powerful, as are certain publications. Level three Access qualifications, while notionally equivalent to A level, may have limited currency and may not enable those who hold them to enrol in the more prestigious vocational courses often filled predominantly by middle class applicants with A levels. Higher education continues to act as an agent of social selection or social reproduction. Inequalities in access endure and have not been eliminated by the massification of higher education. Unequal participation rates by different social groups remain (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p. 315).

In response to the plea that more prestigious universities should make allowances for applicants from poorer social backgrounds and not select mainly on examination performance, *The Times's* third leader article complained,

‘This is an assault on the meritocratic principles at the heart of equality of opportunity, which is precisely what the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission should be seeking to protect’ (15th December, 2015, p. 33).

This is an example of an institutional barrier erected and defended by a powerful institution in the establishment, the national Press, forming public opinion, presenting as common sense a practice seen by its democratic opponents as demonstrably unjust (Burke, 2012).

Learners on Access courses, drawn from the poorer groups in society, are being offered an opportunity, but a restricted one.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

The concept of social capital is not universally accepted. Some claim the concept of *cultural capital* serves equally well as it includes the characteristics of social capital and can be extended to include social class and social conflict (Schuller, 2004, Putnam, 2000). *Social capital* is a coherent and cohesive concept, capable of including cultural capital and generating valuable insights into the experience of non-traditional learners. Schuller (2004) gives equal weight to identity capital, human capital and social capital, but this research and analysis give priority to social capital, arguing it is the form of capital that enables the conversion into economic capital of the other two.

The concept of social capital can be interpreted in more than one way. In Bourdieu's framework (Bourdieu, 1990), social capital, the practices and values binding an individual to others of a similar background, has no intrinsic value, but is used by the more powerful social groups to differentiate them from the members of other groups (Preston, 2004). It is used to bar members of lower social groups from activities and institutions the powerful wish to keep for themselves (Bourdieu, 1979), by giving their own social capital, including cultural capital, greater value than the social and cultural capital of the less powerful groups, particularly the working class (Burke, 2012). In the meritocratic system, the members of the working class aspiring to the upper echelons of higher education may have to acquire the social capital that will be valued and recognised by the most powerful groups, who can use their power to impose on others their evaluation of the differing forms of social capital to maintain their control over society's institutions, including education and the most prestigious professions. .

Social capital can also be understood, as it is here, to comprise the networks and values enabling people to work together towards achieving common goals (Putnam, 2000). It has the potential to bring benefits to the individual, but also to the members of the group with which the individual is working (Schuller, 2004). In an ideal situation, an individual, particularly one taking a leading or influential rôle, has the opportunity to increase her social capital by working towards and achieving the group's goals and experiencing further beneficial outcomes as a result of others in the group recognising her gifts and seeking to find further outlets for them. Putnam's viewpoint implies that social capital may have a value and currency within a particular group that might not be transferable to a different one.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BARRIERS - GAINS

B7: Showcasing

Social capital x Dispositional barriers x Benefits

The application of social capital to the dispositional barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner has the confidence to showcase her knowledge & skills, and to develop an identity as a member of a learning community.

It will significantly increase learners' chances of gaining employment, if they can make themselves known and, however indirectly, advertise themselves by showcasing their abilities. If the learning centre is able to create situations in which their gifts and talents are demonstrated and recognised by those able to help them to find suitable work opportunities, their prospects will be positively transformed. For this, as with all the applications of social capital, increasing learners' *community involvement* (sub-theme 3) and *confidence* (sub-theme 4) in social contexts has great importance.

The willingness of returning learners to enrol on a voluntary scheme enabling them to

work as recruitment agents for the centre and engage in voluntary work in the community alongside public or private sector groups immediately gives them the advantage of access to new experiences and new areas of employment; new networks and individuals, some of whom may be well placed to help them by becoming their patrons, recommending them for particular jobs or offering them employment opportunities.

A readiness to do voluntary work is a characteristic component of social capital. However, the extent of the influence of the learning experience on a learner's decision to do voluntary work is not clear. Associating education with an outcome is not the same as establishing a causal relationship or influence. There are many influences, reflecting choices made by individuals, families and communities (Berhman et al., 1997, p. 3).

Ideally, the centre will set up the networks enabling learners to make the necessary social contacts that will provide showcasing opportunities.

B8: Community

Social capital x Situational barriers x Benefits

The application of social capital to the situational barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner has the opportunity to showcase knowledge and skills from which the community benefits and subsequently offers employment opportunities.

The beneficial work that can be done by a learning centre in ensuring its learners acquire social capital through recruiting new learners or working with public and private sector groups is of great importance in accumulating social capital to break down both situational and dispositional barriers to learning. This appears to be one of the most valuable projects in the programme for non-traditional learners. Those who come to the centre have few of the social networks including people who could help them in their search for employment.

By setting up the opportunities to join such networks, the centre is taking what is probably its biggest step in ensuring students acquire and increase their social capital. Experience suggests those who do voluntary work well in particular fields have a good chance of being offered work when their course is finished if there are openings available.

B9: Success, Security, Self-respect

Social capital x Institutional barriers x Benefits

The application of social capital to the institutional barriers to learning has a positive outcome and the learner gains social and economic capital while the community gains socially and economically.

If the institutions of government and education, having set themselves the task of increasing learners' social capital through education, have been able to offer them level one and two Access courses complemented by language enrichment courses and followed by level three Access courses and, in some cases, degrees, those institutions have done everything to make the learners employable and able to enjoy all the benefits of learning, including employment, to the full. The last task is to ensure there are appropriate occupations for which they can apply, so that the final target of employment itself is achieved. When learners have found suitable employment, it is often because the institution has ensured there is both appropriate advice about the best courses to follow and careers guidance that matches the courses taken. The final piece in this jigsaw is the availability of the jobs themselves. When those who have completed their courses find employment commensurate with the courses they have followed, the process is complete and the targets have been achieved. Both the community and the individual have benefited from their investment. Consequently, when a learner finds suitable employment, she and the community benefit. She gains fulfilling, secure and well paid work; the community is enriched by her contribution both occupationally and financially. The mission of the

learning centre has been accomplished. Learners have succeeded in gaining qualifications (human capital); secure employment through the networks they have joined (social capital, the focus of this cell) and consequently, increased self-respect (identity capital). All three capitals have been invested and, as a result, enhanced. All the outcomes contained within the seven sub-themes of the theme analysis will have been experienced positively.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BARRIERS - LOSSES

L16: Isolation

Social capital x Dispositional barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in social capital to dismantle the dispositional barriers to learning has a negative outcomes and the learner has nowhere to showcase her knowledge & skills.

If learners do not become members of supportive networks during their time at the centre, they are likely to experience isolation, making it much more difficult to find work. They may have to find those networks for themselves afterwards, which could prove difficult and delay their chances of finding appropriate employment for months or even years.

When learners erect dispositional barriers and fail to appreciate the importance of social networks, it can seriously impede their progress towards employment. If an individual or group tries to cut loose from a centre too soon, both social capital and employment opportunities can be lost. Learners may sometimes fail to realise how dependent they have been, not only on the expertise provided by the centre, but also on the social capital the centre has amassed for them. Without the centre as a patron, learners may, because of the dispositional barrier they have constructed, lose their access to the human capital they need to continue developing themselves towards becoming employable. Without using the centre's social capital, they are likely to find their opportunities for work very limited.

Without social capital providing the opportunities to demonstrate them, identity capital and human capital are locked away and cannot be released or converted into the economic capital generated by employment.

Those learners deciding not to enrol on a centre's voluntary activities programme put themselves at a major disadvantage in acquiring social capital. While it would be self-defeating to try to force them to do it, it is well worth being as persuasive as possible, stressing the loss of an experience that could remove social isolation and bring membership of a powerful network, capable of bringing both short and long term benefits..

L17: Disadvantage

Social capital x Situational barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in social capital to dismantle the situational barriers to learning has a negative outcome and the learner leaves feeling at a disadvantage in her attempt to find the more prestigious academic openings she would prefer.

If a centre decides to opt for a working class ethos, it may find itself dismantling one barrier, but reinforcing another. By choosing to adapt itself beneficially to the immediate needs of its learners, the centre may be cutting them off from other benefits otherwise open to them. To choose a working class ethos in which learners feel at ease is to disregard a particular kind of social or linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977): the ability to use language in a manner considered appropriate for those seeking access to universities with higher prestige and status (Koester, 2012). Consequently, the learners who aspire to go to university will probably apply to institutions created after 1992, the least prestigious and with the least likelihood of their graduates finding 'graduate jobs' (Office for National Statistics, 2013). However, it could be argued that the learning centre has accepted the institutional barrier making it less likely that working class learners

enter more prestigious universities and has decided to prepare them for those with lower status. Some learners will be virtually forced by personal circumstances to attend a local university anyway, but it does mean they are being given only limited access to the social capital more freely available to other social groups in the community. Non-traditional learners are more likely to choose newer, less prestigious universities, even when their qualifications might admit them to one with higher status, because they will feel more at home in the former (Reay et al., 2005). This may be unintentional complicity in reinforcing the barriers. A working class learner's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2003) may bring feelings of being out of place in high status universities and a decision not to apply to them. The reassurance of a comfortable *habitus* may bring loss of opportunity with it.

L18: Disappointment, Desperation Disillusion

Social capital x Institutional barriers x Losses

The failure to invest in social capital to dismantle the institutional barriers to employment has a negative outcome and the learner does not find work when the course ends, so leaves in disappointment, disillusion and despair.

When there is no suitable employment available for learners who have completed their Access courses, the project has failed, particularly if it has virtually promised them employment. The economic and social well-being of the learners or the wider society has not improved and the learners' self-esteem and self-confidence have been very badly damaged. Nationally, during the life of the *Skills for Life* project, this was too often the case (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012; Meadows and Metcalf, 2005). This may have been partially caused by the global economic crisis in the first decade of the twenty first century, which meant there were fewer jobs available to those who completed their Access courses successfully, but it seriously damaged the credibility of the project and caused many learners to feel disappointed, disillusioned and despairing when all their

efforts and achievements brought them no immediate occupational opportunities or benefits. Strictly speaking, these negative emotions could be experienced when a learner fails to break through any of the nine barriers, but to emphasise them at this point is to recognise that the nearer one is to the goal, the keener the pain when one does not reach it. The community has failed an otherwise successful learner.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the beneficial outcomes and the losses that can follow the application, misapplication or non-application of three forms of capital to three barriers to learning experienced by non-traditional learners in adult education.

The model has limitations. It could give the impression that the various forms of capital are discrete and that each cell is sealed off from those around it. It would be better to see the cell walls as porous with some seepage between the different capital forms. In Figure 3.1a (Chapter 3 p. 67), it can be seen that various identified benefits of learning are positioned in particular places within the three capitals triangle. This is intended to suggest that, while a particular benefit might predominantly generate a particular capital forms, it could also generate smaller amounts of one or both of the other capitals. Similarly, a barrier to learning might not always sit exclusively in a particular cell. Finally, outcomes of learning are not always clearly benefits or losses. Sometimes, they may be both simultaneously. It is important to be aware of these possibilities when carrying out an analysis of the various intersections in the model. They do not undermine the model, but demonstrate its flexibility to identify the role of separate capitals, barriers, benefits and losses in the learning process.

While the limitations of the model are acknowledged, it is strongly asserted that it provides a comprehensive account of the various positive or negative experiences and the possible

outcomes of benefit or loss when a learning centre seeks to reintegrate into education returning adult learners with few or no qualifications and lack of confidence born of poor past experiences of education.

It is asserted that the model has value for practitioners or researchers as it enables them to carry out a comprehensive appraisal of all the stages of the process from recruitment to course completion that a programme for returning adult learners includes. It gives researchers the tools for evaluating a programme's practices and values and making recommendations or modifications to policy in the light of the findings to ensure a particular programme for returning learners is as effective and successful as possible.

The model emerged during the research process, drawing first on the concept of barriers and then analysing the interview data to examine how participants experienced the barriers and how they applied the forms of capital to deal with them. The outcomes of benefit or increased capital were identified, as were the reduction or loss of capital forms resulting from misapplication of the capital forms or failure to apply them. The data gathered was used to identify the characteristic processes in each of the model's eighteen cells. The analysis justifies the model by providing a means of evaluating the whole experience of adults returning to education comprehensively, highlighting those parts of the process that enhance the learning experience and making successful outcomes more likely and foregrounding parts of the process where the risks of setbacks and breakdowns are highest and suggesting how they might be avoided.

The analysis includes indications of the way in which the BLARE model relates to and embraces the participants' concerns detailed in the seven subthemes of the theme analysis.

The next chapter will draw on the research findings to respond to the research questions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to investigate how three forms of capital can be brought into play to remove or surmount three kinds of barrier hindering or preventing non-traditional learners from returning successfully to education. At the same time, it has recognised that sometimes forms of capital are misapplied or not utilised, which can mean individuals incur losses, specifically of the benefits they might have received otherwise. Sometimes, the forms of capital are not adequate to deal with losses experienced in other areas of a learner's life. The capital resources garnered through learning may prove insufficient to cope with overwhelming and unexpected demands made in a learner's personal life, which may mean the learner no longer has the dispositional strength to sustain a commitment to study or employment, at least in the short or medium term.

The research draws the following general conclusions. Only the returning learners can remove the *dispositional barriers* to their learning, but families, friends and teachers can support them. Teachers can play a particularly important rôle in fostering their self-belief. Sometimes, it might be possible to change the circumstances that created the dispositional barrier by removing the *situational barrier* that triggered it. Furthermore, if the situational barrier is removed by decisions made at a senior management level or higher, then an *institutional barrier* is removed. How the barrier is perceived and classified may depend on the standpoint and rôle of the person who identifies it.

The implication is that *situational barriers* are of two kinds: those created by personal relationships and circumstances and those created from the way learning is made available. The personal ones may be removed or crossed by the learners, although often only with

others' help. Depending on their form, the circumstantial situational barriers can be removed or managed by the teachers, the community or the institutions with the power to instigate change. The changes made will enable students to utilise and increase their identity capital, human capital and social capital during their learning experience.

It has become clear that the three forms of capital are not independent or discrete, but can interact and mutually enhance one another. Completing a course, acquiring a qualification and taking up new employment may simultaneously lead to the increased identity capital generated by growing self-confidence; the increased human capital generated by the more secure and better paid employment available; and the increased social capital generated by higher standing in the community. Together, the three capitals generate more value than they do separately.

The research questions

The main research question is:

To what extent has a selected group of educational underachievers experienced benefits and losses from their later investment in adult learning?

The sub-questions are:

- a) How important have *the identity capital* benefits been to the learners?
- b) How important have the *human capital* benefits been to the learners?
- c) How important have the *social capital* benefits been to the learners?
- d) How significant have any losses, problems or difficulties during and following their learning experience been for the learners?

e) What contribution can this research make to the educational practice in similar institutions engaged in similar work?

Addressing the research questions

The main question: *To what extent has a selected group of educational underachievers been able to benefit from their later investment in adult learning?*

The foregoing chapters are filled with evidence that each of the seven participants in the research benefited substantially by investing in learning as adults. All of them identified occasions when they and their achievements had been recognised and celebrated both formally and informally in their community. All became more confident and gained new qualifications at various levels. One gained new and better employment and a better standard of living.

How important have the identity capital benefits been to the learners?

Most of the students arrived at the centre with a poor sense of identity, low self-esteem and little confidence. Their return to learning brought all of them better self-images and increased identity capital gains, but in varying degrees.

Schuller (2004) raises the possibility that a person can be made overconfident by a surfeit of capital and a sense of identity that is too strong, which could lead to unsought outcomes. Overvalued identity capital may have damaged the MAVIS group. Its leader may have become too confident the group could succeed independently, so unintentionally misspent their social capital when she tried to continue the group's work without the centre's support.

How important have the human capital benefits been to the learners?

Human capital benefits, comprising the knowledge, skills, qualifications and health that help people to function effectively in economic and social life, have been important to all the learners, but achieved to varying degrees. One joined the *salariat* (Standing, 2011). At least one individual winner and all the group award winners enjoyed improved mental health as a result of their learning experiences.

How important have the social capital benefits been to the learners?

The social capital benefits acquired through the return to learning were more important than any of the others for most of the learners. Their social capital came from the networks and shared values created when they worked with others towards shared goals, gaining qualifications needed to obtain fulfilling employment (Putnam, 2000). They were able to show their talents in groups which included showcasing them to people able to find them new opportunities to utilise those talents. They became more secure in their social relationships and were able to make greater and more valuable contributions to their community's social, voluntary and, sometimes, economic life.

How significant have any losses, problems or difficulties during and following their learning experience been for the learners?

The losses, problems or difficulties faced by the learners during their learning experiences were very significant, sometimes destroying the benefits they had accumulated. Quite often the setbacks were not caused by the learning experiences, although the learning or employment experiences were adversely affected by them. Situational barriers unrelated to

the learning, often arising from unexpected family problems led to decisions to suspend studies. Occasionally, advice from teachers or learners' personal decisions about courses to follow in continuing studies may have had adverse effects on their employment opportunities, which meant some learners remained in the *precariat*, (Standing, 2011), living on benefits and insecure casual work. The group award winners seemed to be adversely affected by a teacher's advice which led to the group becoming independent and effectively closing, a great loss for its leader, who had gained considerable identity capital and social capital from it.

e) What contribution can this research make to the educational practice in similar institutions engaged in similar work?

This was a small scale qualitative research, so it would be wise to be cautious about using it as a basis for suggesting too prescriptively how other, similar enterprises might be organised. There are practices at Loomstown that could and have been adopted elsewhere, notably the Community Learning Ambassadors scheme. Two of the participants in the research give it a significant rôle in developing their confidence as learners and potential employees. There is enough evidence here to suggest that it could be valuable in the development of many students.

However, the research is not seeking to make concrete proposals about changing the practice of those teaching basic skills courses. The ideal reader would be a reflective teacher-practitioner (Schön, 1987), engaged in similar work, constantly evaluating his or her own practice and seeking ways of improving what he or she is offering. It is hoped that practices described here and the people they were designed to help would reverberate with the reflective practitioner's experience and enable him or her to evaluate them, both in their own context and in how they might work in his or her teaching and learning environment.

The reflective practitioner might decide quickly that a particular practice would not be appropriate in a different environment, but be inspired to envisage and use a modification or a different approach that might be appropriate for his or her circumstances.

I believe this research would encourage practitioners to recognise the importance of developing several practices: those creating strong learner identities in non-traditional learners, reinforced by membership of a strong, loyal and supportive learning community focused on responding to learners' needs; those offering appropriate support for the learners finding courses challenging; those catering for learners' competing identities as students, parents, partners and part time workers; those offering learners reassurance when balancing the competing demands becomes difficult.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of systems able to identify the stage a student has reached in the learning journey and the courses and activities most likely to develop her as a continuing learner, a person and a potential employee. In addition, the research emphasises the importance of providing courses at every stage of the learning journey leading to recognised qualifications that increase human capital and make the learner's progress towards improved employment or higher level education more likely. Lastly, the research underscores the importance of offering appropriate advice and support for students seeking employment. How exactly a learning centre might respond to all the highlighted needs would depend on the reflective practitioner's judgement about what would be effective in the local conditions.

Contribution to new knowledge

The major contribution to new knowledge of this research is the development of a conceptual model that enables readers to understand the experiences, successes and disappointments of non-traditional learners returning to education. The model provides a

vehicle to explain what has happened to the learners involved in the research and what might happen to others in similar situations in the future. It led to a number of conclusions about returning to learning, capitals, barriers, benefits and losses as a result of the research. Bringing together, synthesising and integrating the literature focused on capitals (Schuller, 2004; Coté, 2005; Schultz, 1961; Putnam, 1996) and the research on barriers to learning (Cross, 1981) has made it possible to identify experiences of benefit and loss as outcomes of the interaction of capitals and barriers. Furthermore, it has led to a deeper understanding of the participants in the research. The theme analysis of their experiences has been enhanced by the insights the capitals-barriers model has brought to it. I am convinced that others involved in this work would find their own understanding of non-traditional learners' experiences improved by using this model.

Final thoughts on the students' experience

The thesis has set out to show that the experience of the Loomstown learners could be summed up in its title: *Benefits and Losses*. Barriers were encountered and faced. Most of them were dismantled or negotiated, although some, often dispositional ones, proved very resistant to removal. For some learners, new barriers appeared as their circumstances changed and these too were difficult to negotiate, particularly if they challenged learners to modify long-held and deeply rooted dispositions in a way that could threaten their identities as parents or independent spirits. Even when the learners did not achieve all they had hoped from the experience or had not yet done so, they believed they had gained valuable benefits. The headline for Cell B9, *Success, Security and Self-confidence*, was chosen to encapsulate the outcomes for those who achieved all their intended targets, The headline for Cell L18, *Disappointment, Desperation, Disillusion* focuses on the lack of social capital that might enable a learner to find appropriate employment, but also captures the very unhappy outcome for those did not achieve their ambition in the *Skills for Life* national project, because they could not break through one or more of the barriers to

employment. The strategies and structures designed at Loomstown to deal with the barriers and open the way to success for learners were designed to keep the number in this disappointed group as small as possible. While learners were not always able to take full advantage of the opportunities created for them, they gained sufficient benefits to justify the project. Loomstown is poorer for the disappearance of projects of this kind from the town.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REFLECTION

In this chapter, I look back on the experience of undertaking the research and reflect on what I have learned; the challenges I faced; the successes I achieved; the things I would have done differently.

What I most valued about this research was its reinforcement of my belief that a qualitative research method yields important and valuable insights unavailable to quantitative researchers. The stories of the Loomstown students and their experiences gave a human context to the quantitative data detailing the depressingly large number of learners nationally who failed to find employment after taking the *Skills for Life* Access courses, but also highlighted other benefits not measured by quantitative national data. The interviews with the participants gave a more rounded picture of what perceptions of success and failure can mean to a person and sharpened awareness of the context of the non-traditional adult learner's experience. Earlier encounters with education often cast their shadow over the new learning experience, which has to be managed before and during the resumed learning journey. The domestic context and the influence of parents, partners and children can ease the way to progress or seriously impede it. The social, economic and occupational context can delay the resumption of the journey and significantly extend the time taken for people to find the employment they seek. Without the help of powerful advocates, some might never find it. When learners come from families where no member is in employment, it can be difficult to make connections with potential employers without help from sponsors and influential friends. This is why it is important to create opportunities for learners to increase their social capital.

Analysis of the various forms of capital has made me more aware of the considerable

emotional and economic investment in learning made by returning learners. All investment involves risk and while it may yield valuable returns, it can also lead to losses that are hard to bear. All the participants in the research accrued some of the possible assets learning can bring, although for most of them those assets did not include better paid employment, greater job satisfaction or an improved standard of living for their families. Nevertheless, they did enjoy academic success, increased self-respect, higher standing in the community and, perhaps most importantly, improved mental health. However, at least one participant, who had gained relatively few material benefits, felt a sense of failure, a loss of self-respect, a threat to her hopes and a fear of continued social and economic marginalisation.

When I began the research, the challenge was to come to know the learners as closely as possible, to walk in their shoes, while ensuring my representation of them and their story was anchored in the truth. I strove to ensure my portrayal of them was rooted in their words and that my interpretation could be defended and justified as an honest re-creation. During the research, I became far more aware of the structural inequalities in society that stood in the way of returning learners' progress. It appeared that in the sixteen years since the publication of the *Skills for Life* document in 2001, successive governments' commitment to second chance education for adults had been diluted.

The research taught me several important lessons. Universities often publish employment figures for their graduates six months after graduating as a measure of their success. Producing similar figures for non-traditional learners is not necessarily helpful. For some, the benefits of learning, particularly related to employment, do not show themselves quickly. It took the teacher, Moira, seven years after graduation to get a full time teaching contract. Clare got her youth work job several years after finishing all her studies, spread over more than ten years. Kate took five years to build up her term-time only contract as a

teaching assistant. Melanie, eight years after returning to learning, faced at least four more years of study before she could achieve her midwifery ambitions.

I have become aware that all the findings in the research are provisional and may be modified by subsequent events. There is also a need for caution in evaluating apparent success or failure. Clare had had other employment opportunities in the past that seemed to offer her the chance to change her situation for the better, but for different reasons, they had not brought the long term benefits she sought. The youth work job seemed to be the solution to her problems, but she chose to leave it. Kate appeared to have reached a stage in her life where she had a job she enjoyed; increased material comfort and a son bound for A level success. The unexpected breakdown of her relationship changed everything and she had to begin rebuilding her life.

A third important lesson has been that it is difficult to ascertain the exact rôle played by education in a returning learner's progress. For some participants, the experience and attitudes they brought to their return to education seemed at least as important as the return itself. Melanie seemed to have had the appropriate dispositions to learning all her adult life. The learning centre simply provided her with the arena for her academic performance. Yet, she also brought with her the firmly rooted conviction that family needs always have a first and overriding call on a mother's time. Emma and Kate, however, had arrived at the centre with a firm intention to improve their lot, but with no idea of how to achieve it. The specific learning experience at the centre, including its particular ethos, practices and relationships, played a major part in finding them occupations in which they could be fulfilled and which helped to form the people they became. Some students appeared to benefit more than others from their new knowledge and skills. Others gained more from the greater self-confidence that came from learning success, which enabled them to flourish in more demanding environments. For every learner, the social networks formed

during, or as a result of, their learning experiences were important. Actually separating the different influential strands from which the students' occupational histories were woven was very difficult.

If I were to conduct this research again, I would choose a different sample of students to investigate, concentrating on a group of nominees, usually about nine or ten in a particular year, for the Adult Student of the Year award. These groups invariably included a wider spread of students and a greater variety of motives for returning to study. Some nominees set up businesses with varying degrees of success after their studies had finished. One disabled nominee later opened a successful mobile hairdressing business and beauty salon. Some decided to go to university when their Access studies had ended, although it had not been their original intention. Having the healthy eating group among my own participants gave the research group more breadth, but there would have been a greater variety of learners if I had concentrated on nominees, rather than individual award winners, who had been chosen partly because of their higher education aspirations, a criterion that excluded other committed and highly motivated learners with different ambitions.

If further research were to follow from this thesis, it would focus first on the nature of the basic literacy courses now being offered to those who in the past would have taken the level one and two Access courses. It would be seeking answers to three questions. Are basic literacy courses for adults available at all in outlying centres such as Loomstown? What kinds of course are available to those who want them? How appropriate are they to learners' needs? Anne, the head of inclusion, feared that the functional literacy taught in the Access programme was inappropriate. The course provided a useful qualification, but was not teaching the necessary skills or doing so effectively. Worst of all, learners were not retaining what they had learned. Her reservations about its effectiveness appeared to be well founded (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). However, she

was equally concerned that GCSE courses would not be suitable for many learners in other respects ideally suited to their chosen occupations. They would never reach the required minimum standard of a GCSE grade C pass. Yet, it should be possible to provide courses ensuring learners acquired the appropriate literacy for the work they wanted to do. Anne believed it was the job of the college, in conjunction with occupational groups to find or devise such courses and provide them. Issues of language as a social and educational discriminator were never far below the surface in this research.

When Vicky, Melanie's daughter, returned to learning to qualify for a midwifery degree, her level three qualification in nursing studies was accepted as equivalent to A level, but she also had to attain grade C or better in GCSE English, Maths and Science. These courses would not have been appropriate for all the candidates and could have become barriers that some could not cross. Further research could usefully investigate whether better basic literacy courses followed by more suitable GCSE equivalent English courses either existed or were in preparation.

Another area for further research would be a quantitative survey of the employment situation of as many as possible of the former level one and two Access students from Loomstown and other learning centres in Moorsmills five years after the project ended in 2011. This would provide an opportunity to begin to test the theory, based on a very small sample, that, whatever its pedagogical shortcomings, the *Skills for Life* project was more successful than it has been given credit for in achieving its employment target. As Judith emphasised, some learners need time to rebuild lives damaged over many years. For many, studies continue after the basic skills courses have finished. There may be more valuable information to be unearthed about how successful learners had or had not been in finding and keeping better paid employment over a longer period.

The third area for research would be the reasons for the small number of men on courses of this kind. The evidence suggests that this is a widespread problem (Power et al., 2011). If half the population is not availing itself of the opportunities being offered and depriving itself of potentially life changing opportunities, the reasons need to be fully investigated and possible solutions proposed.

Postscript

After 2012, no GCSE English and Maths or basic skills literacy or numeracy courses were offered at the Loomstown centre. The crèche was closed against students' wishes, so some parents of young children could no longer use the centre. In 2016, in spite of strong local opposition, the centre was closed. College representatives confirmed they were working with Moorsmills Council on agreed priorities, including, "narrowing the gap" between rich and poor, which appeared to be ideal for Loomstown residents living in the areas of deprivation. Several groups, such as the art class, conversational linguists, flower arrangers and embroiderers, stayed together, but relocated their sessions. However, the courses offered to non-traditional learners from 2003 to 2011 had already disappeared and had not been replaced. If Moorsmills College did not champion such courses, they would not be replaced. The College appeared to have forgotten Kennedy's impassioned reminder (1997) that further education had previously focused on working class people left behind at school, ensuring they had a second chance in education to escape economic and social marginalisation (Thesis, pp. 10-11). This research was begun because I had been persuaded by argument and experience that social justice demands the benefits of education should be offered to as many people as possible. The basic skills courses at Loomstown appeared to be part of an appropriate response to that demand. The intention of the research was to learn how the needs of second chance learners were being met and how they might be met most effectively. There would seem to be enough evidence here to conclude that closing basic skills courses or their equivalent for non-traditional learners is a backward step. The

research recognised the commitment of teachers to improving the lives of their students, filling the gaps in their basic education, opening doors to further learning; raising their social status and self-respect, and increasing their community involvement; helping the unemployed to find work and the employed to gain better paid and more secure occupations. These were worthwhile aims in a community where many had lost hope or the will to improve their lot through gainful employment.

Not least important among the research findings was the great pleasure several learners discovered in the learning process. Let one of them, Melanie, speak for the rest. Aware that her interrupted studies might not bring her the employment opportunities she had wanted so badly, she still felt able to say,

Even if nothing happened, although I'm sure it will, I've learned so much, it's unbelievable. It's good to know!

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APPENDIX ONE

Core questions to the student participants in the research

- 1: Tell me about your family and childhood. Was it happy, conventional, disrupted or none of these?
- 2: Tell me something of your educational and family history. Did you have a good experience of school and education before you became involved in the Centre?
- 3: Tell me about your life as an adult in general before and since you became involved with the Centre, relationships, jobs, involvement in the community.
- 4: How did you get involved with the Centre? What did you hope to achieve when you first became involved with it? Was it difficult to settle at the Centre? What courses did you take or are you taking? What difference have they made to your life? How did being a student at the Centre change what you thought about education and your place as a learner?
- 5: Have any of the teachers at the Centre or anywhere else been particularly significant in or made a difference to your life?
- 6: What did winning the adult student of the year award mean to you? Did it or has it made a difference to your life?
- 7: How far have you achieved your ambitions? Are some of them still part of your plans? What did you achieve that you did not expect? Did your ambitions change as a result of being in the Centre and doing the courses? Did those your ambitions grow or diminish?

What work do you hope to be doing in the future as a result of your studies?

8: Where are the important places in college and at home for you as a student?

9: How are, or were, your studies affected by part time work and domestic responsibilities?

10: Why are the nominations dominated by women? Is it because this is mainly a women's centre?

APPENDIX TWO

Core questions to the centre teachers interviewed for the research

- 1: What were you hoping the award would achieve when you set it up? What benefits were you hoping it would bring?
- 2: Is the centre in any sense a poor relation to the town centre campus?
- 3: Does the ASOYA help you in achieving what you want from inclusion and widening participation? Who are the students it does not motivate, if any? What are the benefits to the centre? Are there any negative effects of the award?
- 4: What is the role of the Learning Ambassadors?
- 5: How far does the centre control its curriculum? Would you agree that the curriculum and, perhaps, funding, will largely dictate the kind of students you will get?
- 6: What difference does it make that the people working and studying at the Centre are nearly all women?